THE Thirty-first OF February

13 FLIGHTS OF FANTASY

by Nelson Bond

THE Thirty-first OF February · Nelson Bond

GNOME PRESS

$3.00

"These are tales which might occur on the thirty-first of February"

A man who can walk through mirrors, a ghost who is afraid of mortals, a visitor from a generation not yet born, an author who has an enchanted pencil, a captured denizen of the fourth dimension — such diverse and intriguing characters as these will be found in

"THE THIRTY-FIRST OF FEBRUARY"

Thirteen Flights of Fantasy

BY NELSON BOND

INTRODUCTION BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

In this book the creator of the now famous *Mr. Mergenthwirker's Lobblies* once again takes us to that outré land of which he is so uniquely competent a chronicler. Nelson Bond's talent curiously eludes the pigeonholes of pat classification. In this new collection of short and long stories neither tone nor treatment of any two of the stories is alike. They are kindred only in that all are fantasies, delicately handled by a craftsman, in which we may escape the gray monotony of commonplace geography and time.

The title, therefore is apt — having been suggested by James Branch Cabell. In the prefacing octave Cabell conveys to his fellow Virginian the privilege of using that title which the reknowned author of *Jurgen* at one time had intended for use in his own Biography of Manuel.

These stories, then, are of the sort which might also have been written on the thirty-first of February. But they are stories which merit reading and re-reading no matter what the calendar date.

THE GNOME PRESS **NEW YORK**

Jacket Design by James Gibson

TWO OUTSTANDING BOOKS

Equally entertaining though completely different in material as well as in physical appearance, these two books are now available to you.

"THE CARNELIAN CUBE"

by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt

This humorous fantasy, delightfully written, is another successful collaboration by these two famous authors. Crammed with wit and satire, this original novel tells the exciting story of an archeologist who searches for his utopia through the amazing power of an ancient charm.

"THE PORCELAIN MAGICIAN"

by Frank Owen

In this collection of Oriental fantasies the craftsmanship of the author appears in all its brilliancy. Among the fourteen stories are some completely new, some now considered classics, but all with strange, exotic plots. Enchanting illustrations add beauty and lure to Frank Owen's prose-poetry.

These, as well as "The Thirty-first of February", represent the books of distinction in science fiction and fantasy which The Gnome Press will continue to publish in the future. Ask your local dealer about forth-coming titles or write direct for descriptive literature.

THE GNOME PRESS **NEW YORK**

NELSON BOND
AUTHOR OF
"THE THIRTY-FIRST
OF FEBRUARY"

"Conveyance of Title in Fee Simple"

So does James Branch Cabell describe his contribution, in the manner of Francois Villon, to this remarkable volume by a fellow Virginian.

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

x x x i

"Item, so that he may abscond
Untroubled and not stay accurst,
I grant hereby to Nelson Bond,
In fee forever, nor the worst
Nor best of titles such as erst
My boyhood fashioned and forsook--
By which I mean The Thirty-first
Of February-- for his book."

James Branch Cabell

Mr. Cabell adds:

"I do not well see what more I could say as to this collection of fine fantasies beyond the statement that, taking them as a whole, I like some of the thirteen stories even better than I do the others. To my judgment, Mr. Bond has genius."

THE GNOME PRESS

421 CLAREMONT PARKWAY NEW YORK 57, N. Y.

THE THIRTY-FIRST OF FEBRUARY

BY NELSON BOND

MR. MERGENTHWIRKER'S LOBBLIES

THE THIRTY-FIRST OF FEBRUARY

By

NELSON BOND

With a Conveyance of Title in Fee Simple by

James Branch Cabell

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?

GNOME PRESS NEW YORK

Copyright 1949 by Nelson Bond

Copyright: 1938, 1939, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1945, 1946, 1948
by Nelson Bond

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission.

First Edition

Manufactured in the United States of America

To

My Mother and my Father

Together here, as ever in my heart

xxxi

"Item, so that he may abscond
Untroubled and not stay accurst,
I grant hereby to Nelson Bond,
In fee forever, nor the worst
Nor best of titles such as erst
My boyhood fashioned and forsook—
By which I mean *The Thirty-first*
Of February—for his book."

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

Author's Note
Concerning the Title of This Book

IT WAS no simple task to find a title for this collection of stories, which combine in no common genre but range from the elfin to the macabre, from the soberly speculative to the frankly frivolous, and are kindred only in that all are fantasies.

—Or, as is intimated by the title finally adopted, they are tales treating of such happenings as most possibly might occur on *The Thirty-first of February.*

For this name to my book, completely solving the vexatious problem, I am indebted to James Branch Cabell, that master of fantasy who—at such times as he is not a-loitering on the plains of Mispec Moor or playing at demiurge in the enchanted forest of Branlon—makes, like myself, his residence in the only slightly less incredible Commonwealth of Virginia.

As conceived by the biographer of Dom Manuel, *The Thirty-first of February* was to have named a chapter in *The Witch Woman.* But that *dizain des amants* will not ever be completed now; in its permanently unfinished state it provides a regrettable and unique exception to the fixed law of Poictesme that all things forever go by tens.

This being so, James Branch Cabell most graciously has granted me permission to publish under that title he once "fashioned and forsook" this collection of my own tales.

To be inheritor of this wholly satisfying title is a pleasure and an honor which I am uneasily conscious I too scantily merit. Nevertheless, I here acknowledge my debt to that writer whose word-weaving I admire most, and for his generous bequest I proffer earnest gratitude. I can but hope that in this table of contents he will find stories which, if differing strangely from the text he once had planned, may not be too greatly displeasing.

Nelson Bond
Roanoke-in-Virginia

Contents

I

The Sportsman 13
The Mask of Medusa 23
My Nephew Norvell 37

II

The Ring 67
The Gripes of Wraith 83
The Cunning of the Beast 97

III

The Five Lives of Robert Jordan 122

IV

"Take My Drum to England" 164
Saint Mulligan 176
The Monster from Nowhere 198

V

The Man Who Walked Through Glass 220
The Enchanted Pencil 229
Pilgrimage 246

I

The Sportsman

The Mask of Medusa

My Nephew Norvell

THE SPORTSMAN

I heard the beat of centaur's hoofs over the hard turf
As his dry and passionate talk devoured the afternoon.

LANNIHAN was indignant when Gray Margrave's application for membership in the Club was read.

"Gentlemen," he addressed the executive committee, "you may count my vote against him. Why, the man is a hopeless cripple. How will it look to have as a member of the Hunt Club a man who never sat a horse in his life?"

There were others who felt like Lannihan. And said as much. A little judiciously, I thought, for in the Club it is wisdom to reserve opinion until O'Hara has spoken his mind. For thirty years now O'Hara has exercised a gentle tyranny over the affairs of Longditch . . . a dictatorship nonetheless real because of its velvet sheathing. But finally O'Hara spoke.

"Tush, gentlemen!" he said reprovingly. "You do be gabblin' like a yard of biddies, and not like the sportsmen you claim to be. Is it so important, then, that the man cannot walk?"

"Or *ride!*" added Lannihan. "O'Hara, this is a *Hunt* Club. What possible pleasure can Margrave find in membership here? He can't take part in our hunts or trials. He won't enjoy our dances. He can do nothing but sit by the fire and—"

"And what more," interrupted O'Hara softly, "could a

man be wantin' than to sit hisself afore a cracklin' log with tall glass in hand, and him warmed by the good talk of his friends?"

Lannihan had sense enough to shut up then. For the shadow of the Old Country had begun to slur O'Hara's speech, and when that happens it is time to tread on eggs. And because none present, including Lannihan, had any wish to feel the lash of O'Hara's tongue, Margrave's membership was approved on the first ballot.

So Gray Margrave came to live at Longditch. Came literally to *live* at the Club, I mean. For where most of us, nuisanced by business obligations, used the clubhouse only as a weekend retreat, the retired Margrave was sufficiently free of ties to make it his home. He did not allow such financial affairs as still concerned him to interfere with Club activities in any way. He had a private wire strung into his rooms, and he brought with him his man, Muldoon, to care for his few personal needs.

His coming altered the atmosphere of the Club, though not in the way you might think. Even Lannihan was forced to concede after a few short weeks that Margrave's presence made the clubhouse a homier, more livable place. Previously, members had disliked starting for the Club too early on a Friday afternoon, each dreading to be the first to get there. The aging caretaker and the kitchen help were drab company for a lonely horseman impatiently chafing his wrists before a cold fireplace. Many a time I, as the rest, had wandered glumly about the grounds, into the stables, through the gardens, counting the slow minutes until O'Hara or one of the others should show up. But now all that was changed. No matter what hour of the day or night a member should choose to drop in at the clubhouse, he would find soft lights glowing from the cuppy windows of the lodge, the hearthlog blazing, and Margrave seated be-

fore the fireplace, his thin face smiling toward the doorway as the newcomer stomped in. Because of this, good fellowship prospered. More and more of us developed the habit of stopping off at the Club once, twice, three times a week, confident that there awaited us companionship, good conversation, and warming drinks.

He was a thin man, Margrave, as I have already said. But his thinness was not the weak slenderness of a sapling. His was the wiry strength of a fine-spun steel wire. All about him, I can see now, was steel-like. His hair, blue-gray at the temples; the fine, scratched-metal lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes; his eyes themselves, deep set and burnished. Sometimes when thought or fatigue relaxed his guard his eyes mirrored a fragment of the suffering he had known . . . for Margrave had always been a cripple. But he wasted no moments in self-pity, nor did he make any bid for sympathy from his associates. He was a cheerful, friendly man, not with the resigned false courage so many invalids affect, but with an honest, wholesome cheeriness that caused you quite to forget that without a helping arm he was chained to that chair before the fireplace.

The illusion he sought to foster—and the one which all of us, willy-nilly, must subscribe—was that he was not crippled; that the woolen blanket drawn tightly about his wasted knees was merely protection against such cool drafts as sighed through the clubhouse. A stranger visiting the Club might easily believe Margrave, musing in his chair, one of the riders who, too weary to return to the city, had decided to spend the night at the lodge.

Margrave was meticulous in his demand that no member of the Club be disturbed by his handicap. He discouraged all reference to his helplessness from the very first day when at the end of an evening's conversation our little group broke up and Corson in gruff, friendly fashion said,

"Time to turn in, gang. Can I give you a hand to your rooms, Margrave?"

Margrave had merely looked at him, not unkindly, but with his eyebrows just faintly arched as though in bewilderment.

"Why, no, thanks, Corson," he had replied. "I think I'll have another pipe and then run along upstairs myself."

It was like him to say it that way. He would "run along" upstairs . . .

It was Muldoon, his dour but faithful attendant, who cared for Margrave . . . but when or how was something of a mystery. Certainly no member had ever seen Margrave either ascending or descending the stairs that led to his chambers. Margrave's place was the sprawling morocco chair just to the right of the fireplace. There he might be found at any time. If alone, he would be smoking and staring into the flickering fire. Or more often he would be reading a book about horses, hounds, or the hunt, for these things were his passion.

When our group conversations turned to horses and horsemen it was Margrave who gathered the reins of discourse in his lean, veined hands, his steel-gray eyes reflecting the soft fire of the hearth, his slim body tensed forward in his chair as though he were posting for, say, the Mudwater Topple or Chokehole Ditch. For although he had never sat a horse in his life, he knew all there was to be known about riders and their mounts. You might ask him the most unlikely questions—the name of a steeplechase champion of twenty years ago, the silks of a little-known stable, the scenting traits of an obscure breed of dog—and get an answer. He usurped the authority of our hunting library, and rightly so, for Margrave had read everything

on the subject and knew which theories held true and which rubbed leather on the rise.

"Faith," O'Hara was wont to say, "and I'll stack the man's knowledge agin a ninny o' pratin' textbooks . . . and that with him half-drunk, to boot. 'Tis a creed to him, ridin', and not just a hobby as to the likes of *us*."

Which from Geoffrey O'Hara, M.F.H., was high praise indeed.

The man was gentle, unbelievably gentle. His tongue was untainted with the bitter malice that so often marks the incompetent. There was that time when our Club gave its Fall Festival, one of the rare annual occasions on which we allow our wives and sweethearts to enter the saddle-smelling sanctity of our retreat.

Margrave dressed for these affairs, always. His stock was as white as that of any member, his Club kerchief as proud. And if his pink had never known the sting of the whipping wind or the slash of the bramble tree, its glossy newness had been carefully buffed to unobtrusive age . . . and if you looked closely you could see a faded patch that might easily have been the stain of a faded mudspot.

So he had sat that night, sipping a drink and nodding his head delightedly in time to the music, when Sally Lou Ambers (she that later married Tod Greenaway) in heedless gaiety approached his chair. She had met Margrave only that evening, and in all fairness to her she was not the first who had been deceived by Margrave's concealment of his condition. And thus it happened.

"Mr. Margrave, you can't just *sit* here when all the other men are dancing. Come . . . dance with me." And, laughing, she had tugged at his hand.

To all of us who stood there, suddenly over-conscious of

our own damnably sturdy limbs, it was a horrible, awkward moment. I cannot guess who would have broken the dead silence that greeted her words, or what stupid thing might have been said had not Margrave himself answered.

"Now, I'm sorry, Miss Ambers," he smiled regretfully. "Really sorry. But I can't dance tonight, much as I'd like to. You see, the truth is—" We held our breaths as he hesitated—"The truth is, I came a bit of a cropper this morning. Roughed the old ankle, you know? So if you'll have patience with a clumsy old man and sit this one out—?"

And of course she did; they laughed over Margrave's stupid fall at ". . . that cursed Chokehole Ditch, my dear. I might have known the turf would be soft . . ." until Greenaway, whitefaced and apologetic, came finally to take her away.

So spring came again, and fall, and yet other springs and falls, until five years had passed . . . and even now, looking back, I cannot understand where those years fled. For my only recollection of those vanished seasons is that in them Longditch knew a golden era, and that an ineffable something had stolen into our Club life that made us the jolliest, the happiest club in the East . . . if not in the entire world. Somehow our riders always got their fox those years. And perhaps I, too, am getting old and querulous, but it seems to me that in those days the air was more winy, the turf more springy, and the woods and the hills of Longditch greener and more fragrant than they are today.

Certainly we had finer mounts than ever before or since. And that was Margrave's doing, for it was he who, seated in his wheel chair before the paddock, matched wits and guile against the horse dealers, choosing and rejecting with uncanny judgment to build us slowly but certainly a per-

fect stable of hunters. And it was his purse strings that loosened when the Rockwood Stables failed and their fine string went on the block, finding its way thence to us.

He knew dogs, too, and every good huntsman will understand what I mean when I say it was he who tuned our pack, tuned it till its pursuit music was a bell-toned symphony.

No wonder at all, then, that though O'Hara retained his Mastership of the Hunt, the members created a special office for Margrave. Somehow this seemed necessary. I remember to this day how, when he was notified of his election to Club Housemaster, his face twitched hungrily, and how one lean hand crept from beneath his blanket to dab at his cheeks. But his reply was typical.

"Dammit, men," he coughed, "you've gone crazy. I have no right to . . . Well, hell! Let's all have a drink!"

That was the year, too, when young Jipper Tappen's filly, Princessa, took the Golden Steeplechase at the Downs, and Tappen, his broad face one tremendous grin, drove home in triumph with his trophy. We were all gathered at the Club to welcome him that day, but he didn't even answer our greetings. He went directly across the room, carrying that huge cup his filly had won to Gray Margrave.

"Gray," he said, "it was you who picked Princessa for me, and it was your training advice that won her the 'Chase Cup. So here . . . this is yours."

And he handed the trophy to Margrave, whose hands, damn it all, trembled so that the cup fell to the floor. You can still see the dent in its side. But I know that was the happiest moment in Margrave's life . . .

Five years! Now, looking back, I wonder how it was that I never noticed in those days that Margrave's face was

growing thinner; that his steel-gray hair was turning white; that his once firm shoulders were beginning to sag more and more unsurely.

But I did not notice these things. And so it came as a shock to me to tramp whistling into the Club that evening to find him missing from his accustomed seat by the fireplace. O'Hara was there, standing with his back to the fire, and Jeffries, and Wilcoxon. Rupert was seated on a stool, staring sightlessly into the blaze.

O'Hara caught my questioning glance and lifted his head expressively.

"Upstairs, lad. He's unwell."

Even then I couldn't believe it.

"Upstairs?" I repeated stupidly. "Margrave?"

"He's not been well for months, lad," said O'Hara gravely. "It's only the great heart o' the man that's kept him sittin' here, and we fussin' and blatherin' him with our own little troubles."

"But it can't be anything serious!" I protested. "Why, only yesterday I was talking with him—"

"That's as may be, lad," nodded O'Hara, "and was it not always so with all of us? But I'm afraid . . . the doctor is afraid . . . that this may be—"

"No!" I said, a trifle too loudly. "No! It's impossible! I don't believe it."

But you can't stay the flight of the fox in the brush, nor the rush of the hound in the hollow. Nor can the heart of a strong man stay his end when the last huntsman closes in. And though we waited there, as one by one the other members heard the news and came posthaste to the Club, it was not within our power to do more than wait. Wait and hope —and curse whatever stupid God had crushed a soul as great as Margrave's into a damaged mold—while upstairs

the doctor and old Muldoon wrestled vainly for Margrave's life.

And when old Muldoon crept down the stairs finally, the firelight glistening on the wetness of his withered old cheeks, there was not one of us could bear to break the silence. Only it is good to know that it was Lannihan who, at the last, lifted Margrave's glistening, unused spurs from the member's rack to hang them tenderly with those rusting others on the Old Members' board . . .

Now, there is one thing else, and it the strangest of all when you come to think of it. O'Hara was speaking, and there was a faraway note in his voice that I have never heard again.

"Faith," he said, "and I wish we were in the Old Country now. It is autumn there, too, and the fields are all crimson and gold. And Margrave would have his wish at last in the sight of pink coats and the sound of bugling hounds in the dawning.

"I remember," he said, turning away from us heavily, "a tale as I heard when I was a lad in the Isles. They will tell you, there, that the same is true of an old sportsman as of an old soldier . . . that he does not die, but slowly fades away . . .

"They say, too, that when a true huntsman dies he does not forever put away his leather and his bit . . . but that one day, lying coldly, he will be roused from his last sleep by the song of silver bugles in the air and the baying of deathless hounds in full cry. And that he joins that hunt to ride hell-for-leather each morning of time after a fox that is the canniest and wisest of all foxes—"

I may be a fool. It was imagination, of course, and the magic spell of O'Hara's words that inspired it—and per-

haps it was an early breath of winter that stirred through me like a thin, cold wind from beyond—but for a frozen moment I could have sworn that I heard, far off in the distant hills, the plunging echo of pounding hoofs and the faint, far *tantivy* of a sounding horn . . .

THE MASK OF MEDUSA

Keep your eyes tight closed
For if the Gorgon come, and you behold her,
Never again will you return . . .

IT WAS a far from prepossessing place. In fact so gray and drear its aspect that it tended to repel rather than attract the passerby. Which was, of course, a most enticing fault—so far as Shaner was concerned. To him it was a matter of no moment that the shop-front's mullioned windows were milky with neglect, that from sprung hinges sagged a door wan with recollection of old paint, that lock and bars were green with verdigris. The place was uninviting and obscure. Moreover, it was *open*. This last was reason enough for using it.

Shaner was an opportunist. He was, as well, a firm believer in the adage that one should make for any old port in a storm. Since this *was* a haven—of sorts—and since a storm *was* brewing at his heels, his choice was clear.

Above the entrance, restless in the sluggish breath of twilight, creaked a sign limned in tarnished gilt:

GLYPTOTHEK
Gallery of Classic Marvels
24
Lifelike Models of
Infamous Persons
24
Visitors Welcome
ADMISSION FREE
T. Cavendish——Cerologist

Beneath this sign, scarce noting its strange title, and through the door beyond stepped Milo Shaner. He stumbled over a worn doorstep and passed from a world of apprehensive light into a somber, welcome sanctuary . . .

The hall was lighted, but so futile the striving of its cobwebbed globes that, freshly come from staring into the blood-red eye of the setting sun, it took Shaner some seconds to accustom himself to the gloom.

When at length he did so, it was with a start. For what had seemed to him an empty hall now proved to be peopled with a host of crowding figures more menacing than those from which he fled.

A moment of cold panic gripped him briefly, and in that instant desperation thoughts of flight, battle, cringing submission, coursed wildly through his brain. A bitter anger laced with gall the terror in his mind. To be caught thus . . . with escape so nearly won. And by mischance, at that. Small consolation to know he had planned well and cunningly. There bulged in his pockets the ransom bills that proved his guilt. And all too well Shaner knew the penalty awaiting a convicted kidnaper and murderer.

Pleading denial blurted from his lips. "Listen—" he began. "It's all a mistake. I can explain every—"

And then, belatedly, his tortured brain grasped the fact that these new foes were *still.* They neither moved nor spoke nor changed expression. With hope-sharpened eyes Milo Shaner looked at them again . . . then suddenly he laughed aloud, his nervous mirth discordant in the silence.

Waxworks! His search for refuge had brought him to a museum of waxwork models. A gallery of lifeless . . .

"My pets amuse you, sir?" asked a quiet voice.

Once again a dart of panic pricked at Shaner's ragged nerves, for the gentle query seemed to float from nowhere

to his sleeve. But this time his instinctive recoil came and was gone in the halting of a breath. Composedly he turned to meet the eager gaze of the little man beside him.

"My pets," repeated the proprietor. "You find them amusing, sir?"

"Hardly that," answered Shaner. "Interesting, yes. But I shouldn't say amusing."

"Yet you laughed. I *heard* you laugh, sir."

"Relief," chuckled Shaner frankly, "not amusement. To tell you the truth, they somewhat startled me at first. I thought they were alive. They *are* very lifelike, you know."

"Oh, but of course," said the little man. His eyes were large and pale and abnormally intent behind thick-lensed glasses; they seemed to peer not simply *at* Shaner, but beyond and through him. They were strange eyes, at once servile and forceful, querulous and possessed of a dark, lost knowledge. A dancing light flickered briefly in their depths . . . or possibly it was a reflection glancing from the thick-lensed glasses as the man nodded. "Very lifelike —very! But, of course, that is to be expected. Isn't it?"

He put the query almost as a statement, yet with an air of eagerness and hope. His lips half-parted, eyes intent on Shaner's face, he waited for an answer, head cocked to one side in an attitude of curiously birdlike expectancy.

"Well—" conceded Shaner, "I suppose so. Not all—uh —sculptors do as well. You *are* an artist, really."

It was, he thought, rather handsomely said. But he was not averse to paying a compliment, especially when by so doing he might win a needed ally. Shaner was an opportunist. There was a chance—an off-chance, but nonetheless one to be considered—that the police might blunder into this unlikely place. If so, even a cheap wax sculptor, warmed by flattery, might prove a valuable friend. Particularly—thought Shaner—the sort of tallow-dabbler who

called himself "cerologist" and his chamber of monstrosities (Shaner laughed inwardly) by the classic title of "Glyptothek."

The little man—Cavendish was his name, remembered Shaner suddenly—flushed with pleasure.

"It's good of you to say so—" (*"Not at all," murmured Shaner politely*) —"but, really, you're too kind. I don't deserve . . . You see, it's not as if I . . . Well, what I mean is—" He floundered into confused silence, blinking rapidly and almost apologetically at Shaner, while his tiny, moth-like hands fluttered aimlessly at his lapels. Then he cleared his throat and tried again. "Would you like me to show you the gallery?"

"It wouldn't be too much trouble?"

"Trouble? Oh, *no,* sir! I'd *like* to!"

"I'm sure," said Shaner, "it would be a pleasure to see it through your eyes. But I don't want to keep you. And it must be almost closing time?"

"Oh, *that!*" said Cavendish, and frowned. He took a mincing step to the door, closed it and shot its bolt, pulled a cord that unfurled heavy curtains over the door and window-panes alike. "Now we won't be bothered. So, if you're ready—?"

Shaner smiled. Things were working out even better than he had hoped. What had been fair security was become, with the drawing of the curtains, isolation. Vanished now was any likelihood of the police searching this place. There remained to him but one problem: that of spiriting himself with the ransom money out of this neighborhood. That chance would come later, after the hue-and-cry had died down. When it came he would be ready for it. Shaner was an opportunist.

"I'm ready," he said, and followed Cavendish.

One cheapening hypocrisy, at least, was Milo Shaner spared. He did not have to simulate false interest in what a proud and eloquent guide showed him during the following half hour. Preoccupied as he was with his own uneasy problems, he found himself becoming more and more interested in that which he saw and that which he was told as Cavendish, pathetically intent to please, led him from one to another of the macabre images with which the hall was thronged.

"This," chattered the diminutive artist cheerfully, "is Roger Saunders, the poisoner. You may remember he killed his brother, his brother's wife, and their five-year-old son? Cyanide of potassium. He hoped to inherit his brother's coal-and-coke business, but—"

He prattled on glibly, supplying an incredible fund of dates and data, as Shaner studied the model before him. A ghoulish thing it was under the baleful lights of this musty hall. But a work of art. An undeniable work of art . . . in its fashion. Oh, it had its faults. Cavendish had shown a deplorable lack of imagination in his modeling of the figure, for example. Surely the poisoner might more effectively have been posed in the crouching act of administering his lethal draft to, say, another figure lying in a bed, reaching gratefully for that which would destroy him? But, no. This Roger Saunders stood upright and alone, with no prop or artifice to indicate the fashion of his perfidy.

"And this," continued Cavendish, his explanation a background theme to the fugue of Shaner's musings, "is Nicholas Rodriguez—'Nick the Spick,' they called him. The knife was his weapon. Heaven only knows how many victims—"

But works of art—there was no denying that. What if the infamous Nick Rodriguez were not depicted with blade in

hand? There was murder in his heart and in his eyes. There were taut, strained lines between his brows; matching creases scored his swarthy cheeks from flared nostrils to tensed jawline. The expression was that of the ruthless killer brought to bay, angered, incredulous at his capture, but staring into the face of doom with furious defiance.

And all, all were like that. Unimaginative Cavendish might be, but at the art of delineating character he was a craftsman. Almost, thought Shaner with something akin to a shudder, he was too competent a craftsman. There was a grim warning implied in these rigid figures . . . and Shaner did not like the implication. It struck too close to home.

"Now, here," beamed Cavendish, "is one you'll like. His murder method was quite unique. Air embolism. Ever hear of such a thing? He injected an air bubble into the veins of his victims with a hypodermic needle. The fact that he was a practicing physician made it easy for him, of course—"

"*Another* murderer?" demanded Shaner, a bit sharply. "Are they *all* murderers? All of them?"

The little man's thick-lensed glasses nodded frosty answer. "But of course. Didn't you know? That's my mission in life."

"Mission?" repeated Shaner, uncomprehending.

There was a strange and sultry ardor in the artist-proprietor's voice, a ferocity of which Milo Shaner had not dreamed the little man was capable.

"Murder," he cried. "Murder, that most horrible of crimes. I hate it, sir—loathe and despise its perpetrators with every fiber of my being. It is my mission, then, to show the world these fiends in human form, display them in all their brutal bestiality, that men may view them, tremble, and take heed!"

"But—" began Shaner.

"My *sacred* mission," continued Cavendish febrilely, his strange eyes pools of pallid flame. "One that will never end till justice has been meted to earth's last murderer."

"Still," said Shaner, "there are *other* crimes. And in a museum of this sort, I should think—"

"It is murder," said the little man sternly, "which must be thwarted and exposed. The destruction of a life: is there any more wicked inhumanity which can be practiced . . . any single act more criminal than that?"

It was obvious, realized Milo Shaner, that argument was useless. Upon this subject the diminutive cerologist was clearly monomaniac. Better to shift the conversation to some less intimately hazardous field. He said soothingly, "You're right, of course. Quite right—"

"My *sacred* mission," Cavendish repeated. "There is one alive now whose . . . whose semblance—" He hesitated over the word—"belongs in this gallery. I was listening to a history of his villainy just before you entered. My radio, you know. And never was a blacker page written in the ledger of mankind than the record of his crime. A kidnaper, sir, who brutally murdered his innocent victim—"

"The radio?" interjected Shaner hoarsely.

Cavendish nodded. "Then callously proceeded, as if the child still lived, to collect the ransom money pledged by the anxious parents. A cruel deed, sir. A foul deed—"

The musty hall was curiously hot. There were beads of perspiration on Shaner's forehead; his tongue was parched and brassy. He said, "They . . . they caught this criminal?"

"Not yet. But they will," said the little man with somber satisfaction. "They will. He has the ransom money on him. Fifty thousand dollars in fresh new bills, still bound in the bank's wrappers."

"I . . . see," said Shaner slowly. "Then the bills are marked? When he tries to spend one—"

Cavendish smiled tightly. "They'll catch him. And if they don't " His smile deepened, but mirthlessly—"and if they don't, *I* will."

"You?" exclaimed Shaner. "You?"

But now it was Cavendish who seemed stricken with a sudden unease. The lambent fury dwindled from his eyes as he veered abruptly from the subject.

"Forgive me, sir," he said mildly. "Don't mind me, please. I fear I feel too strongly on that subject. It's my weakness. I get carried away. We were looking at *this* model, were we not?"

Shaner nodded, content to drop the subject. "Yes."

"A most interesting case," said Cavendish. "An air embolism. Of course, for a man of Dr. Hartwell's position in the community, it was a simple matter to—"

"Hartwell!" cried Shaner. "Did you say . . . Dr. Hartwell?"

"Why, yes. That's right."

"But Dr. Hartwell was never captured," said Shaner. "I remember reading about the case. He was never even found. Because—" Complete recollection struck him abruptly, stunningly—"because he could not be identified! He had been an erratic recluse for years. No one knew him well. There were no pictures available to the police."

Cavendish shifted miserably from foot to foot. His mothlike hands betrayed the agitation his words tried to conceal. "I believe that *is* so, sir. But—"

"But you—" There was a vague and dawning comprehension in Shaner's voice—"you have an image of him, accurate and complete in every last detail. Cavendish! Where did you get the description from which you modeled this figure?"

The little man cried, "I . . . I don't remember. Somewhere. It must have been printed somewhere?"

"It wasn't, Cavendish."

"Well, I . . . I'm an artist. I have my methods—"

"Yes," said Shaner thinly. "You are an artist . . . in wax. You have your methods: the dipping vat, the paste, the brushes. Cavendish, tell me the truth! That lifelike figure . . . is it a model of Dr. Hartwell? *Or is it Hartwell himself?*"

The little man's hands ceased their motion with one final, despairing gesture. Then, bleakly, "Yes," said Cavendish. "That figure is—or was—Dr. Hartwell."

Milo Shaner laughed. It was not a clean and wholesome laugh. There was a note of hysteria in it. This little saint, this eager little cherub who "loathed and despised" an art in which he was not only adept, but a ghoulish master. A slayer with a "mission" . . . to kill and stuff like pigeons for the public's gape his fellow-murderers . . .

"But you mustn't laugh, sir," wailed Cavendish. "I beg of you! You don't understand!"

"I understand plenty!" rasped Shaner, returning abruptly to the world of reality. Milo Shaner was an opportunist, and it occurred to him suddenly that here was an end to all his problems. Cavendish would be his ally now, not by virtue of flattery or friendship, but because he must be. They were twin swords this duo held, each over the other's head, and Shaner's was the keener.

"I understand plenty, you mealy-mouthed scoundrel," he repeated. "You hate murder, eh? With twenty four victims to your credit, *you* pretend to be the benefactor of mankind!"

The small cerologist's voice was a thin, dry pleading.

"And I *am*, sir. I am exactly that. I—"

"How did you kill them?" demanded Shaner. "Pistol? Knife? Or into the tallow vat alive, perhaps?"

"You're wrong," sighed the little man. "I've tried to tell you, sir, but you won't listen. *I* did not kill them."

"I suppose," jeered Shaner, "they killed themselves, then?"

"That's it, sir," nodded Cavendish. "That's exactly what happened. They killed themselves . . . by looking."

"Looking? Looking at *what*, for God's sake?"

"At—" began the little man, then hesitated. Pale eyes sought Shaner's beseechingly. "Did you ever hear of the Gorgon's head?" he asked.

"The what?"

"The Gorgon's head. The head of Medusa."

Shaner stared at him, a dim recollection struggling with his impatience. "Medusa? I seem to remember something. A monster of legend? A myth? A fable?"

As though the telling of his secret had loosed some curb upon his tongue, a new eagerness suffused Cavendish. He bent forward, his thick-lensed glasses glinting. "No legend, sir," he breathed. "Medusa was no myth, no fable. She *lived* . . . how many years ago, man cannot guess. So long ago that we have only a confused tale of her exploits and her horror. Of the hero, Perseus, who slew her—"

"Looking into his polished shield," recalled Shaner, "because it was death to look upon her face. Now I remember. So terrible was her face that merely to gaze upon it turned men to—" His voice faltered, and his eyes turned suddenly to the rigid figures in the gallery, then back to Cavendish. "Turned men to stone," he whispered.

Even as he spoke the words voicing the wild surmise that had struck him, he did not believe them. It was fantastic, incredible, impossible.

But Cavendish nodded.

"Exactly, sir. Even as these."

"But that's insane!" cried Shaner. "Medusa and her sister Gorgons . . . they were just myths. Symbols of something, perhaps, the ancients could not explain. Strange monsters so horrible to look upon that the sight of them chilled the blood. But not to stone. That's impossible!"

"You would not," asked the little man quietly, "care to look upon the mask?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's here. I found it," said Cavendish, "long ago in the wild, lost grottoes of Greece. Where or how does not matter now. But I have it. And it has been my means of fulfilling my sacred mission in life. The destruction, the cleansing of the world, of those who slay their fellow men."

It was then that sanity, the cool balm of logic and reason, came to Shaner's rescue. He stared at the little man for a long moment, shocked at the burning madness in his strange, pale eyes. Then suddenly he laughed, aware that for a time he had half believed Cavendish, had half shared his madness.

He said curtly, "Okay, Cavendish . . . let's stop clowning now, shall we? It's a good joke, but I'm in no mood for laughs. Let's you and me talk turkey."

"I'm not sure," said the little man, "I understand you, sir."

"Then I'll put the cards on the table," said Shaner bluntly. "Skipping all this 'Medusa' nonsense, you're a killer. You know it and I know it. You're cracked on the subject of ridding the world of murderers . . . and somehow you've succeeded in mounting a collection of your trophies in this hall of horrors."

"I didn't kill them," protested Cavendish. "I told you, they killed themselves."

"Yes, I know. By *looking*, eh? Okay. Stick to that story if

it pleases you. But I don't imagine you'd want the police to snoop around here and dissect one of your stone models, would you?"

"I -" faltered Cavendish, and licked his lips. "I don't understand," he said, "What are you driving at? What do you want of me?"

"Your help," said Shaner, "in getting out of this town. Oh, don't look so scared, Cavendish. Play ball with me and nothing will happen to you. I don't like the police any more than you do. That's why I'm here tonight; that's why I want to get out of this burg.

"And you can help me. You're a business man, free of suspicion. You can crate one of your 'lifelike models,' and send it away in a van. If I were the 'model' you crated . . . you see what I mean?"

The little man seemed to be listening, but when he answered it was strangely, thoughtfully.

"You," he said, "fear the police? You too are a . . . a murderer?"

"I didn't say that," snapped Milo Shaner. "I just said I was in trouble. I want your help. Well?"

Cavendish said, "It will take money. I would have to rent a van. I am not a wealthy man."

"I'll take care of that," Shaner told him. From his pocket he took a heavy bundle of fresh new bills, removed a brown paper band and riffled the money invitingly. "Double whatever the cost will be . . . that fair enough? How much?"

Cavendish stared at the torn band on the floor. A bank wrapper neatly labeled: *100—$10.00—100*. His eyes lifted with understanding to those of Shaner, and his voice was a shred of sound in the silence.

"Then it was *you*," he said. "You are the one who kidnaped and killed that child?"

He backed away, arms bent before his face as if to shield himself from the very sight of Shaner.

Shaner frowned.

"Don't you realize you're being a damned fool?" he demanded. "What I did or did not do is none of your business. You've got yourself to worry about. Do you want me to tell what I know about your gallery? I don't have to *go* to the police, you know. A telephone call will bring them here."

Shaner was an opportunist. He knew when he held the whip hand. But this idiot was making things *very* difficult. Perhaps a movement toward the door . . .

"If that's the way you want it," said Shaner, "I'll go. I imagine the coast is clear, with or without your help. But I'll make that call before I leave town—"

"No . . . wait!"

The little man's cry stopped him at the doorway. A thin smiled touched Shaner's lips. He turned questioningly.

"Yes?"

Cavendish said, "I did not *want* to do this. I never want to do it. But in this case, it *must* be done—"

"You will help me, then? That's sensible," approved Shaner. "Believe me, Cavendish, it will be better this way. Much better. For both of us."

"Yes," nodded the other man. "I think it will. Much better . . . for both of us. You didn't believe my story of the Gorgon's head, then, sir? It rang untrue?"

Shaner grinned. "A bogey-man tale for kids, Cavendish. But I'm a practical man. I didn't believe it."

"I had hoped to convince you," sighed Cavendish. "But since I failed—" He ducked suddenly behind a counter at the far end of the gallery. When he reappeared, he clutched something in his right hand. Something Shaner could not see in the gray shadows.

"Look, then!" cried Cavendish, his voice like biting flame. "Look, murderer, upon the crimson mask of Medusa!"

Shaner scowled. Madman, he thought. Was there no reasoning with this stupid fool, this monomaniac now pressing something—something—forward into the fusty glare of the bulbs? Something hideously dead, yet monstrously alive. Something a man could not believe in; something which simply could not be. Disdainfully he glared at the grisly object, and:

"Ridiculous!" rasped Shaner. "Utterly ridic—"

GLYPTOTHEK
Gallery of Classic Marvels
25
Lifelike Models of
Infamous Persons
25
Visitors Welcome
ADMISSION FREE
T. Cavendish——Cerologist

MY NEPHEW NORVELL

Prophesy to the wind, to the wind only for only
The wind will listen.

I'M NOT asking any favors from anybody, and I don't want any more trouble . . . not even with that beagle-beaked cashier at the First National Bank. I'm a broken-hearted guy, and all I want is to be left alone. I don't want to listen to any more cracks about crystal balls or tea-leaves or Ouija boards, and Mrs. McGill can go whistle up a rain-spout for her three weeks' room-rent. I've made up my mind what I'm going to do, and as soon as I can get a refund from the E-Z Payment Gemme Shoppe, I'll be on my way. Only it does hurt, because there'll never be another girl but Winifred for me, and I *did* think the boys at the plant liked me.

But that's water over the dam now, so don't get the idea I'm bellyaching. I just want to put my side of the story on the record, that's all. If, after hearing the true facts, people *still* want to say it was my fault instead of my nephew Norvell's, well . . .

To begin with, I've never been much of a family man. I had high hopes, it is true, of becoming one in the reasonably near future, with Winifred and myself as parties of the first and second part, respectively, and to that end I had contracted with the E-Z Payment Gemme Shoppe to pay too many turnips for a sliver of a carat set in what

judging by the price must have been U-235. But I've never been one to cuddle up to sundry kith and kin. Which is why I was more or less surprised when my landlady, Mrs. McGill, met me at the door as I came home from work one evening, skewered me with a brace of bifocaled gimlets, and said, "Mr. Grady—"

"Mrs. McGill," I told her, "for once in your errorless life you're wrong. Go look at your calendar. Today is only the 22nd. My rent is not due."

"I know that," said she grimly. "It's not due till a week from next Friday . . . at which time I'd admire to have it *all*, if you please; not half of it and half an excuse. What I wanted to tell you is, your nephew is here."

"That's fine," I said. "That's just wonder *What?* My *who* is *where?*"

"Your nephew," she repeated, "is here."

"Mrs. McGill," I said firmly, "it might interest you to learn that I *have* no nephew."

"He said he was your nephew," declared Mrs. McGill, her jaw clamping stubbornly. "And there was every reason for believing him. He acted *very* peculiar."

"In such ways," I suggested, "as picking locks? Or trying on my suits? Did you happen to point out to him my piggy-bank? It's nice to be helpful, you know."

"He said—" began Mrs. McGill. But I was on my way upstairs, taking the steps four at a time. Primed to grapple with a sneakthief, I burst into the reconverted linen closet laughingly known as my boudoir . . . then stopped dead. The room was as empty as a politician's Fourth of July oration!

Except for one thing. There was a white oblong lying on my bureau. A visiting-card. On it appeared in neat, precise handwriting the cryptic words:

Dear Uncle Joseph:

Sorry I can't wait. Power running low. Must refill stellium cartridge. Will return later. Affectionately,

Your nephew,
Norvell

And on the obverse of the card was the name:

Mr. Norvell Grady Carson

For a full two minutes I stood and stared at the card without grasping its meaning. Then, when I *did* try to make some sense out of it, I just got more and more confused.

In the first place, being an only child I could not possibly be anyone's uncle. So far, so good. But granting a mistake had been made, and that this Norvell Carson character had blundered into my digs by accident, there remained a pair of king-sized question marks. What in blazes did the cockeyed message mean? And how in the ditto of the same conflagration had anyone left my rooming-house without running the gantlet of Mrs. McGill's omniscient eye?

For she had not seen him leave. That point she made very clear when I confronted her for further information and for explanation.

"Where is he?" she countered my query. "Why, up in your room, of course. Where else would he be? He said—"

"—he was my nephew," I finished fretfully. "Yes, I know. But he isn't, and he's not. Are you *sure* you didn't see him leave, Mrs. McGill?"

"Positive!" she said flatly. "I've been downstairs all afternoon. I can guarantee he didn't—"

"Perhaps the back door?" I suggested.

"He did not leave by the back door," she declared, "nor by the front door, nor by the coal chute or any window." She glared at me as if she were beginning to wonder where I'd hidden the body. "Mr. Grady, I want no funny business around here, if you please. I operate a respectable rooming-house for genteel people."

"The operation," I told her disgustedly, "was a success. But the patient died. Very well, Mrs. McGill. He didn't go. He's upstairs sleeping in my shoebag. Let's skip it."

And I went back upstairs to dress for dinner and my regular Wednesday wooing session with Winifred.

But my date with Winifred that night was a sales-booster for the aspirin cartel. We went to a movie, and in the newsreel saw the latest on the strike situation. That set me off and, innocently enough, on the way home I started yapping about my own grandiose plans for the future of Joe Grady.

I blew off a lot of steam about working for others, and about how some day I was going to branch out and work for myself—on a project or projects unspecified for the simple reason that I had nothing particular in mind. I was just iffing, you understand; just playing a little game of isn't-it-going-to-be-wonderful-when?

But I caught Winifred in an oh-so-you-think-more-of-your-own-selfish-self-than-of-me mood, and before I knew what was going on, my chatty little monologue became a discussion and the discussion turned into a redhot argument.

Of course it ended up with me explaining that I hadn't meant a word I said, and Winifred sobbing spots into the lapel of my blue serge suit, and me putting the ring back on her finger again, and her goodnight kisses were something out of this world even if they were a bit salty. But I

was definitely in the glumps when I got home. And things were not improved by the presence of Mrs. McGill downstairs awaiting my entry.

"Mr. Grady," she began without preamble, "I am what is known as a long-suffering woman—"

"Insufferable," I corrected, "is the adjective. But leave us not quibble. You were saying?"

"I am an insufferable and honest woman, and I run a respectable rooming-house for genteel people—"

"So far," I said, "the script is familiar. Get to the point, Mrs. McGill."

"The point," she stated coldly, "is that man. Your nephew. He's still here."

I sighed. "Mrs. McGill, I told you before that I *have* no nephew. Moreover, if he's in my room it must be *again* . . . not *still*. He was not there this evening when you told me—"

"He was," declared my landlady blandly. "You yourself admitted he was sleeping in your shoebag—though how on earth a body can be comfortable in a shoebag, I don't know. But that's no affair of mine. What concerns me is that there is another lodger under this roof paying no rent. I'll thank you to remember that your room is rented on the basis of single occupancy. If anyone shares it with you, your rent will be raised accordingly . . . and at once. Furthermore—"

I hit the staircase on the double. My room was at the head of the stairs. There was a crack of light showing under the door, and I had not left a light on when I left before sundown. It was obvious, therefore, that someone was in the room, but when I turned the knob I found the door securely locked. This was a puzzler because I had the only key to that lock, Mrs. McGill having lost hers many months before. With increasing wonderment I inserted

my key, opened the door, and stepped into the room. As I did so, a young man turned from my work table, stared at me with friendly, happy eyes, then hurried forward to greet me with outstretched hand.

"Uncle Joe!" he cried. "Uncle Joe, I'm glad to meet you at last!"

Now, I know what you're going to say I *should* have done at this point. When a guy enters a locked room to find there an utter stranger who claims to be someone who couldn't possibly exist, there are only two possibilities open to him. He should shout for either (*a*) the bobbies, or (*b*) the booby-hatch.

But I did neither of these. I was too numb at first. And by the time the initial shock had worn off, I was surprised to find myself *liking* this guy!

That's right . . . liking him! Don't ask me why; I'm a stranger here myself. He just appealed to me, that's all. I had a weird sort of feeling about him. He reminded me of someone I knew, or at least someone I'd seen before. Of course, there's nothing strange about that. Lots of people look like lots of people; in fact, anybody who doesn't look like somebody isn't much of a person.

Anyhow, I took an instant and instinctive liking to this kid. In view of which it wasn't so much a matter of getting him out of there as it was of finding out how he got in, who he was, where he came from, and what this was all about.

As soon as I could reclaim my rapidly-being-mangled paw, I shot these questions at him. He took them all grinning, and answered in his own way. Which was, I might mention, only a shade less confusing than archaic Choctaw as spoken by a tonguetied Swede through an alum-soaked gag.

"Who am I?" he chuckled. "Why, I'm your nephew, of course. Your nephew Norvell."

"That," I conceded cautiously, "is fine. Just fine. And your—uh—your mother? How's she?"

"Oh, fine, fine!" he said heartily. "Of course she had her usual cold this winter. Bit of lunar laryngitis, you know. We tried to talk her into taking the Martian waters, but she's a bit old-fashioned. She *will* go to the moon every season, though nobody who *is* anybody goes there any more. It's become so second-rate, you know—"

"Yeah, that's right," I agreed, edging away from him a trifle. "Very old hat, the moon; that's what I always say."

Norvell nodded. "Oh, *very!* But, Uncle Joe, I must say I'm surprised to find you in these—" He glanced around the room in obvious bewilderment mingled with a touch of distaste—"in these surroundings? I had quite a time locating you. Wore out three stelliums, not to mention blowing a diatemporic right in the middle of the Restoration. Why are you living *here?* Where are your mansions?"

"Mansions?" I repeated dazedly.

"Why, yes. The one on Long Island, the one out west in —what was the name of that old State? Oh, yes, now I remember!—California. And the one in Bermuda?"

"Oh, my *mansions!*" I laughed feebly, backing toward the door. "You mean my *mansions?* For a moment I thought you said—uh—mansions! Why, I left them in an old safe-deposit box somewhere, and mislaid the key. Very careless of me . . . very. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go look for it—"

But he was younger than I, and moved faster. He stepped between me and my avenue of escape, and eyed me with a worried frown.

"Now, wait a minute," he said thoughtfully. "There must be some mistake. You *are* Joe Grady, aren't you?"

"Well, I *thought* I was. But we won't make an issue of it. If there's someone else you'd rather have me be—"

"Joseph T. Grady? Born November 26th, 1916, in New Haven, Connecticut?"

"Guilty as charged, Your Hon—I mean, yes. That's right."

"Educated at Public School Number 131, eight years; Woodrow Wilson High School, four years; M.I.T., four years?"

"Check, check, check."

"Employed by General Engineering Corporation, 1938; volunteered, Army of the United States, 1940?"

"Check, check."

"Honorably discharged from Army and returned to occupation, 1945? Married in Sandusky, Ohio, 1947?"

"Check," I began, "ch—" Then the doubletake hit me. "Hey, wait a minute! What's that again? Married *where? When?*"

"Sandusky," he repeated, "Ohio. April 19th, 1947?" He glanced at me anxiously. "Why? Is there something wrong? I tried to be very careful—"

"Oh, no!" I moaned. "Everything's perfectly ducky. Except for a few minor details."

"Such as?"

"Well, merely that I've never set foot in Sandusky, Ohio, in my life . . . that I'm not married yet . . . and it won't be April 1947, until sometime next spring."

He stared at me, a flush of the most abject humiliation climbing slowly to his cheeks. He murmured, "Oh, no! What a frightful boner! The transtemporal locator; it must have short-circuited."

"Check," I said caustically, "and double-check." I was beginning to get just a little irked with his screwball lingo. "Also the hutsut must have rawlstoned on the rillera! Would you mind getting down to facts, chum? Who *are* you, and where did you come from?"

"Who?" he repeated despondently. "Why, I'm just who I said I was, your nephew Norvell . . . and I've come to visit you from the year 2003, A.D."

Opportunity, the maxim books tell us, only knocks once. That's a blatant falsehood. In my case, opportunity whaled the living daylights out of my portals twice . . . and I didn't have the sense to respond.

Not that I'm bellyaching, you understand. I'm just trying to explain how I stumbled into this mess. I don't expect the police to believe me, and Winifred has made her view painfully clear. But I want to make *someone* believe I didn't commit forgery, and I'll swear on a stack of Bibles I did not at any time sneak a look at the company's research records.

I missed my first chance to keep my nose clean when I failed to holler for the law the minute I caught my alleged nephew in my room. I gave Opportunity its second boot in the puss when, upon hearing his whacky claim of having originated from the Twenty-first Century, I didn't catch on. Those boys down at the plant are great practical jokers, but you'd think they would come through with an explanation when the gag went haywire, wouldn't you?

The stinkers! And I'm a trusting soul . . .

Yes, I'm a trusting soul. When my visitor gave out with his declaration about having come to me from the year 2003, I didn't make the obvious retort, "Oh, yeah? Wait here a minute, chum. I've got to see a doc about some manacles." No, I just stood there with my jowls drooping while my nephew Norvell proceeded to drive home his fantastic premise.

"I know it's hard to believe, Uncle Joe," he understated, "but it's the truth. I *am* your nephew. Great-grandnephew, to be more accurate. And I *did* come back here out of what

is to you the future. But I felt sure you'd understand, being the genius you are. I couldn't write the biography without your help. And of course our family owes its present fame and fortune—everything it possesses—to you."

I found words at last. Two words remembered from a childhood love for H. G. Wells' futuristic novels.

"Time travel!" I croaked. "Time travel!"

"That's right," beamed Norvell. "I'm the first man to accomplish it . . . though it seems my experiment has been only a modified success. I meant to meet you some years from now. About 1955 or so. Right at the height of your success." And he smiled shyly. "I hoped you would be proud of me, Uncle Joe."

"Oh, I am!" I said hastily. "I am! Nice going, my boy. But what's all this about my genius creating the family fame and fortune? Mansions, vacations to the moon—"

"Eh? Why, your inventions, of course!"

"My . . . inventions?"

"Yes. The Hertzian modifier, the countergrav tube, the hypatomic motor . . . all those things that made spaceflight possible." He stared at me in some dismay. "Don't tell me you haven't started working on your inventions yet?"

I said feebly, "Don't look now, my delirium nephew, but you're barking up the wrong tremens. Not only have I not started working on those polysyllabic monstrosities you prate of, but I haven't the faintest idea what you're raving about. I wouldn't know a Hertzian modifier if I saw one walking down Fifth Avenue in a cutaway coat. What is it, anyway?"

"Why, it's this," he said, taking from his pocket a slim, stylus-like pen, and with it scribbling a diagram on a scrap of paper as he talked. "An instrument to convert the long and short communication-band waves into the even shorter

Herzian wave range, making possible interplanetary conversation with normal radio equipment." He tossed me the scrap of paper. "It's very simple, really. Any schoolchild can build one. But I suppose all great inventions look simple once they've been discovered."

I stared at his schematic with mounting excitement. He was right. It was a fantastically simple instrument he had diagrammed. Yet in its very simplicity lay its cunning. Its basic concept was a radical departure from every line of current thought and research. I could see where engineers working along more orthodox lines might knock themselves out for decades without finding this preposterously easy solution. So simple, yet so obscure, was the mystery of the wheel to primitive man . . . the power latent in steam to the alchemists of the Middle Ages . . . electronics to Victorian savants.

I said, "Hey, this thing should *work!*"

"*Should* work?" repeated my nephew Norvell. "But of course it works. We use it all the time. It, and the dozens of related instruments derived from it. That's what made our family rich, you know. Royalties."

"And *I'm* supposed to have invented this?"

"Certainly. It's well known that you did . . . or will . . . or—"

He looked a bit bewildered, and no wonder.

"It's very confusing," he said plaintively. "I expected to meet you some years from now, after you had become famous for your inventions. I wanted some data on your life. For the biography I'm writing, you know? It's rather awkward to talk to you about things you haven't even *done* yet."

That's when the Great Idea struck me . . . damn it! Anyway, I thought at the time it was a Great Idea. Looking back on it, I'm sure I must have been [illegible]

or slightly drunk or both, because I was taking this lunk's doubletalk seriously. Okay, okay . . . I know! I should have suspected the fine hand of those jokers at the plant right away. But I didn't. I swallowed the whole silly story hook, line and sinker, and gave birth to my magnificent brainstorm.

"Norvell," I said breathlessly, "how do you know it wasn't *meant* to be this way?"

His eyebrows questioned me politely. "I'm not sure I know what you mean, Uncle Joe."

"Simply this," I explained. "In spite of what your history books tell you, I'm no genius. I'm just a plain, ordinary, run-of-the-mill mechanical engineer with an average education, a fair I.Q., and ambition.

"Left to my own resources, I couldn't have invented the Hertzian modifier in a million years. But with this diagram as a clue—" I jabbed a finger at his schematic—"and with foreknowledge that it *will* work, I can make one. And so far as the world of 1946 is concerned, I'll be its inventor!"

Some of my excitement brushed off on my nephew, and his eyes opened wide.

"You mean it's a sort of a circle? A closed circle in time? In the year 2003, I will always come to you in 1946 with the details on the inventions which are to make you famous in later years?"

"Exactly!"

"But that's impossible!" said Norvell wildly. "In that case, *who* invented the modifier . . . and *when?* It couldn't be you, because you didn't know about it until I described it to you. And it couldn't have been anyone else, because in my time you are known as its inventor."

"I don't know about that," I laughed happily, "and I

don't care. It's the chicken and the egg problem all over again . . . but this time the yoke's on mankind. All I'm sure of is that if we work this right everything happens according to plan.

"Now," I continued, "let's get down to brass tacks. Can you get me blueprints of this gadget you've sketched?"

"Why . . . I suppose so. Yes, I know I can."

"And of the other things you mentioned? The things I'm supposed to have invented?"

"Yes."

"Okay," I told him. "Then that's it. You get them for me. I'll build working models and have them patented, and the Grady career will be launched. And don't think," I added gleefully, "I won't be on deck to bust the traditional bottle of champagne! Exclusive Scoop Number One for your biography, nephew, can be the bona fide report that upon the occasion of your Uncle Joe's first patent application he got stiffer than a bluebird's bill in a blizzard."

Norvell said a bit thoughtfully, "It might work. I can't think of any reason why it shouldn't."

"Of course you can't," I reasoned, "because it *did* work, or you wouldn't be who and what you are in your era."

"But that doesn't make sense, Uncle Joe," he demurred. "I never did this before. I'd remember having done it. Yet if I didn't do it, you couldn't have invented—"

"Give it up, lad," I advised him. "Your forehead's beginning to look like a corrugated washboard. We're not interested in theories, anyhow. What we want is results. Is it going to take you very long to get the data I need?"

He shook his head. "No. That is, it will take me several hours to collect the blueprints, but those hours will not enter into your life at all. With my time travel device, I can shuttle back and forth at will between our eras, coming to

you on any given date. In fact, if you'd like me to, I can hop forward to my century, collect the blueprints, and return here *yesterday*."

"That won't be necessary," I decided hastily. "I'm confused enough as it is. But you *can* get back here?"

"Oh, yes." My nephew Norvell was smugly confident. "I had a bit of trouble at first with the diatemporic and the stellium supercharger, but I have them under control now . . . I think. Shall I come back tonight?"

"Tomorrow evening would be better. I'm as eager as you to get my career started. But I'm tired now, and I'd like to attack the project with a fresh mind.

"Besides," I remembered, "my landlady's on her high horse already. She'd raise merry blue blazes if she heard us gabbing here into the wee hours. And the fewer people we let into this secret the better off we are. Right?"

"Right!" agreed Norvell. "Well, Uncle —" He held out his hand and grinned at me. I couldn't help thinking how *very* much he looked like someone I knew. Someone to whom for the life of me I could give no name. "This is — what is that quaint expression of your age? Oh, yes—this is too long."

"*So* long," I corrected abstractedly, and slipped to the door, opened it a crack to make sure the coast was clear. "Okay, Norvell. She's gone to bed. I guess you can—"

But there was no answer. My nephew was gone.

I'm not bellyaching, you understand. I buttered my bread, and I'll lie in it. Even if the boys at the plant *aren't* men enough to stand up and confess their part in this, I hope that some day when it has all blown over they'll tell me how their stooge spirited himself from my room while I wasn't looking.

I was standing in the only doorway. He didn't hide in the closet or under the bed or anywhere else, because I searched that room high and low for him. It is true the window was open. But it's a thirty foot drop to a concrete sidewalk and a twenty foot leap to the roof. Whatever other strange attributes my visitor may have had, I'm sure he had no cat blood in him.

Curiously enough, I slept well that night. I slept, in fact, exceptionally well. All my dreams were extra special deluxe jobs, surrounded by little pink clouds and embellished with dollar signs rampant on a field of gold.

The next day I carried my good humor to the office and broadcast it so offensively that even the hired help took notice. Doris Chandler, who does the stenographic chores for our department, commented on it when she came in with my morning mail.

"What on earth has happened to you, Joe?" she asked. "You look like a Kentucky colonel in a mint-julep patch. An unknown uncle die and leave you the Standard Oil Company?"

"Close," I chuckled. "Close, my comrade in thralldom. In case your bonny blue eyes fail to penetrate the disguise, you are gazing upon a stag who is on the eve of bursting his shackles with a rousing *yoicks!* and an equally noisy *tally-ho!*"

"This stag," queried Doris shrewdly, "didn't by any chance drink his fill last eve?"

"You do me," I told her reproachfully, "a gross injustice. Such sentiments come rudely from such lovely lips."

"We'll leave my lips out of this," said Doris, "for the time being. If there's anything I can do in the bromo or aspirin line, speak now. You'd better not let the boss catch you in this condition."

"The boss!" I sniffed. "I smile; I lear; I smirk!"

"So you do. But don't forget—where there's smirk there's fire. Or maybe you've decided to enlist in the great Army of Unemployment?"

"Maybe," I grinned. Then, mysteriously, "Doris, can you keep a secret?"

She met my gaze squarely, speculatively, for a long moment, a curious sort of half-smile on her lips. "I believe so. Why?"

"What would you say," I asked, "if I told you I was quitting the company to go out on my own?"

Surprise widened her eyes and jolted the half smile from her lips. "Joe!" she gasped. "You're joking!"

"The way Mr. Bell joked," I countered, "when he horsed around with a little contraption called the telephone. Well? Am I crazy? What do you think of the idea?"

"Oh, Joe," she cried, "I think it's wonderful. I *know* you can make a go of it. I've always thought—" She stopped abruptly. Then in a more cautious tone, "And your fiancee? What does *she* say?"

"She'll be delighted, of course. This means we can get married at once. You won't spill this, will you? I don't want to tell the boss about it just yet."

"You mean . . . she doesn't know?"

"She?" I frowned. "The boss?"

"Your fiancee. Miss Overton."

"Oh, Winifred? No. I'm going to tell her tonight."

"I see," she said slowly. "Well, Joe, all I can do is wish you the very best of luck."

"Thanks, kid," I said. "I'm going to need it."

"That you are," said Doris strangely. "That you are, indeed." She started toward the door, hesitated, turned. "I hope—" she began, then stopped again.

"Yes?" I prompted. "Something else, Doris?"

"Just one thing, Joe. Just one more thing. Please don't forget . . . a good cigar is a smoke."

On which perplexing note she turned and fled. The door slammed behind her. Women are the *strangest* creatures . . .

I was all set for Mrs. McGill when I went home that evening. As I expected, she was waiting in the hallway. As I also expected, she was still watering her plaints with tears.

"That man, Mr. Grady," she sniveled. "That man is still sharing your room."

"Oh, really?"

"I don't know his name. But whatever it is, I want more room rent. I'm a very poor woman—"

"You're a very poor housekeeper."

"—and I can't afford to let my lodgers run roughshod over me by taking in their friends and relatives. Moreover, I don't intend to let you get away with it. Mr. Grady, I know my legal rights—"

I left her floundering in a sea of *ergoes, to-wits* and *whereases,* and hurried to my room. But once again my nephew Norvell was conspicuous by his absence. However, he *had* been there. Upon my work table lay two items. One was a note:

Dear Uncle Joe:

Having a little trouble. Transtemporal still acting up. Am experiencing difficulty in contacting your era, then can't stay long when I get through.

Also having problem finding blueprints. May take a little time (by your standards as well as mine). However, will contact you as soon as successful.

Affectionately,
Norvell

P. S. In view of your present circumstances, thought you might be able to use this till I get through with desired data.

"This" the second item was a magnificently hand-tooled saddle-leather billfold. It was a piece worthy of admiration in its own right . . . but it never got the appreciation it deserved. For when I picked it up I discovered its plump little belly to be stuffed with luscious legal tender of the United States of America.

And *such* bills! The big, juicy figures in the corners scorned pecuniary bachelordom; they all proudly flaunted one or two opulent zeroes. Fifties . . . hundreds . . . it was enough to make a guy greedy. For the first time in my life I understood why they call it "legal tender." This was the *tenderest* legal stuff I've ever seen.

All told, my nephew's contribution to the Joseph T. Grady Fund for Aged and Decrepit Joseph T. Grady was $12,000. Twelve thousand smackers! That's a thousand a month. Almost two fifty per, every Monday on the Monday, for a year.

Small wonder I went slightly off my wavelength for a while. I bathed in tepid water churned to a boil by my own racing pulse, dressed in a gray pinstripe fog with necktie to match, and floated downstairs. Mrs. McGill was still holding forth to herself on the subject of my moral turpitude. I stunned her into silence with my first words.

"Mrs. McGill," I said, "you are absolutely right. I have acted most unfairly."

"It's a lie!" she began staunchly. "Ask anyone who knows me . . . *What?* What did you say?"

"I have used you," I conceded, "almost as poorly as you use the dustpan and broom. I *have* been sharing my room. And the other occupant *is* my nephew."

"Ah-hah!" she snorted. "So your conscience got the better of you after all, eh? And how long has he been here? When did he come?"

"In twenty-oh-three—" I began, then stopped. She would never understand the truth, I realized. I shifted abruptly to more reasonable, if less accurate, figures. "He moved in," I amended, "about twenty days ago. Three weeks."

"Three weeks!" she exclaimed starkly. "Three weeks at eight dollars a week . . . that's twenty-four. And another eight in advance . . . that's put down your two and carry one . . . thirty-two! Not to mention extras for water, heat and light—"

"Mrs. McGill," I said grandly, "I'm sorry I deceived you. To prove it, here's a little something to even the account." I peeled a crisp one hundred dollar bill off the top of my roll and pressed it into her palm. "Never mind the change. Go buy yourself a new set of uppers."

She gaped at the banknote, running the rainbow from flabbergasted green to embarrassed crimson. At last she found her voice. "Why, Mr. Grady, sir!" she gasped, "Thank you, sir! I knew you were only teasing me all the time, sir. I always did say you were the finest gentleman lodger in this house."

"Sir?" I suggested.

"Sir," she said. "But your nephew . . . poor dear! He can't be very comfortable. Your room has only a single bed."

"Oh, he gets by," I answered vaguely. "Some nights he sleeps in the top bureau drawer; some he hangs himself up in the clothes closet. He's not a bit choosy. But now—if you'll stop licking my hand, Mrs. McGill?—I'm afraid I must run along. I have a date tonight."

And I left, the echoes of her undying affection and

pledges to "make things more comfortable for that lovely boy" still ringing pleasantly in my ears.

My ears rang again, but with another kind of music, when I broached the subject of my new venture to Winifred.

She stared at me as if I had just announced the acquisition of a third arm.

"You're doing *what?*" she gasped. "Leaving the company! Have you lost your senses?"

"I never had it," I grinned. "The Government takes it every ten years." Then, rather lamely, as the light of my life failed to laugh with me, "It's a joke, sugar. You know, senses . . . census?"

"Joke! How can you joke at a time like this? It's no laughing matter. Giving up a good job and a steady income to become a . . . a wildcat inventor!"

"Not me, baby," I said, still struggling to keep it on the light side. "I wouldn't invent a wildcat. What fur?"

But Winifred was in no mood for gags. She threw me a look that was ten below zero Centigrade.

"The poor man's Thomas Edison!" she sniffed. "What makes you think you're clever enough to earn a living by your wits?"

I had the answer to that. Two of 'em in fact. One in the history books yet to be written, the other a fat green roll in my pocket. But I didn't want to tell her—or anyone else—about my nephew Norvell. Not yet.

"Well, I could earn *half* a living," I tried feebly. "After all, honeybunch, a guy's got to gamble once in a while if he ever wants to get anywhere. I can work for the company for a hundred and forty-two years, and all I'll get out of it will be a testimonial dinner and a gold-filled watch.

"This way, I've got a chance to make a name for myself.

I'm young and ambitious and reasonably bright, and I've got some good ideas—"

"Such as—?" she demanded.

"Well," I temporized, "such as a gimmick to convert long and short communication-band waves into the even shorter Hertzian wave range. A sort of modifier, you know—"

"I don't know. And it sounds absurd. What good is it? What would it do?"

"It would make possible interplanetary conversation with normal radio equipment."

"Interplanetary conversa—" Winifred's tone turned acid. "Oh, that's *marvelous!* Simply marvelous! Such a *useful* thing! Every home will need one. I can hardly wait till you put it on the market. Just think . . . I can speak to all my friends on Mars and Venus."

"That's not as ridiculous as you think," I told her soberly. "This is a new era we're entering. Controlled atomic power is almost here, and spaceflight is just around the corner. I have some ideas on *that* subject, too. Someone's got to invent a gadget to provide spacecraft with artificial gravity so the passengers won't be swimming around in thin air, and it might as well be me. Someone's got to perfect a deflector to shield spaceships from stray meteors, and it might as well be me—"

"Someone's got to bring to an end this idiotic discussion," said Winifred coldly, "and it might as well be me." It was the first time I'd ever seen her lips like that. Thin as a razor, and just about as friendly. She looked just like her mother. "Are you determined to go through with this madcap scheme, Joseph?"

I don't like being called "Joseph," particularly in that tone of voice. I started dripping a few icicles myself.

"I am."

"Nothing will alter your decision?"

"Nothing."

"Very well." She tugged at her ring finger angrily and handed me the fruits of her endeavor. "Under the circumstances, you can hardly expect me to continue wearing this."

"I suppose not," I said, and took the ring. But it would have taken a superman to resist the impulse that seized me. "There's just one more thing—" I said casually.

"There's nothing more," she said. "Goodbye."

"There's just one more thing," I repeated. "You're apparently worried about my financial future. Well, you can stop worrying. I have nothing to fear on that account."

Nonchalantly I riffled before her startled eyes the bankroll with which I had hoped to surprise her in a very different way.

She gasped, "Joseph! Where did you get that?"

"From a friend," I replied airily. "Merely an advance on some information he expects to get from me later. Maybe I *am* crazy, my love, but there are a few other fools around who believe in me. Well . . . toodle-oo!"

My round, that was, and I should have been gay about the whole thing. But I wasn't. I was miserable and blue, because no matter what her faults, Winifred is the only girl in the world for me. Now that I've lost her, I'll never marry. Never!

I was miserable, so I sought company. Hiram Walker and I holed out in a booth in the back room of Mike Clancy's taproom, and the mere fact that Hi was in a bottle and I was not didn't disturb our friendship. As a matter of fact, in a remarkably short time he had taken up new quarters closer to the seat of my affections, and I . . .

And I? Well, to be disgustingly candid about it, I don't

remember the events of that evening too well. I have some hazy recollection of first requesting, then insisting, and finally demanding forcibly that everyone in the taproom drink with me, *on* me. I remember flipping bills at Mike with contemptuous abandon, ordering him to "keep the change," and bragging that there were millions more where this pitiful chickenfeed came from. There was something about offering to match thousand dollar bills with any man in the house . . . something else about taking everyone to the moon for the weekend . . . something else about . . . oh, I forget. It's all mixed up.

I'm under the impression that at some time or other during the evening I must have visited the Automat and played slot-machine with the little food cotes, because next morning I found in my pockets six dollars and thirty-five cents, all in nickels: a cup custard and a dish of cole slaw. I guess that was *after* I took all my buddies home from Clancy's place in a rented hearse, and probably *before* I went to the office, because I remember blotting my letter of resignation, written at the boss' desk despite the protests of an indignant nightwatchman, with a slightly frayed pancake. I think I gave the pancake to Mrs. McGill.

There may have been other adventures, too. I don't know. I keep hearing things daily . . .

An alarm bell, driving redhot rivets into my skull, woke me the next morning. I threw the alarm clock out of the window, but the bell kept ringing, so I staggered out of bed, crawled across the floor on my hands and knees, and snarled a fuzzy, "Yeah?" into the telephone.

It was Doris calling, and she sounded worried.

"Joe? Are you all right?"

"He doesn't live here," I said. "Thissee Ah Sung's Chinee laundly."

And I hung up, but the phone jangled again before I could decide which of the three beds to head for.

"Joe—" said Doris.

"No spikka da Inglis—" I began.

"Joe, listen to me! You've got to get down here right away. Things are in an awful mess!"

"You're telling me? Go 'way!" I said to the little green man trundling his wheelbarrow up and down my right leg. "Things are in a mess here, too. Mrs. McGill has installed a revolving ceiling—"

"You've got to tell them you didn't do it," she insisted, "and that precious fiancee of yours is telling everything she knows to the police, and Clancy swears he'll prosecute, and if you did do it, Joe, you'd better get out of town before they blockade the highways—"

"Wait a minute!" I bawled. "Do *what?* What's Winifred telling? And why should Clancy want to prosecute? What am I charged with?"

"They haven't finished the list yet," Doris moaned. "They're only on page three. So far they've mentioned fraud, embezzlement, forgery, illegal entry, counterfeiting, assault and battery, grand and petty larceny—"

"Great day in the morning!" I cried. "I sound like a one man crime wave! Hold everything; I'll be right down!"

"Joe, if you *did* do it, don't come! Skip town till the heat's off. I'll keep in touch with you—"

"Pish!" I said. "Also tush! You've been reading whodunits again. I'll be there in two shakes."

And I dug my clothes out from under the carpet.

Doris certainly had not overstated the case. Things were in a mess at the office. The joint was alive with characters, some of whom I knew, others whom I'd never seen before in my life.

My boss was there, and Doris, and a pinchnosed guy with hair combed sidewise across a billiard-ball noggin. Mike Clancy was there, and the nightwatchman, two cops, and a man with a face ten feet longer than the Hudson Tunnel. Winifred was on deck, and a lot of other people named anonymous.

When I entered, they all lunged at me as if it were feeding time at the zoo and I the *table d'hôte*. The bobbies reached me first, and as they wrestled for my wrist one of them bellowed, "Anything you say may be used against you. Why did you do it?"

I said, "Put the jewelry away, stupid, and get your nose out of my mouth! What did I do? And who says so?"

Winifred cried plaintively from the corner, "Don't antagonize them, Joseph. Confession is your only hope. Make a clean breast of it and they may be easy on you."

"Clean breast of *what?* What's this all about?"

"You see, officer?" said my boss. "A hardened desperado, brazening it out. You might as well—"

"You, *too?* Good Lord!" I shouted. "Don't tell me a guy can be arrested for quitting this company?"

"I suppose," snarled my late boss, "you're going to pretend you didn't break in here last night and—"

"I *walked* in."

"He broke in!" bleated the watchman. "He busted in ragin' drunk, an' assault-an'-battered me into submission."

"I walked in," I repeated indignantly, "and wrote a letter of resignation. It's true I'd had a short beer or so, but—"

"You went into my office?"

"That's right."

"And sat at my desk?"

"I did."

"And opened my private files?"

"I took a sheet of paper out of the upper right hand drawer, if that's what you mean. I didn't see anything 'private' . . . unless you mean that picture of you and an overripe blonde playing pretzel on the beach at Coney Island."

"Never mind that! The point is, you admit you had access to the confidential records of this company?"

"If you want to put it that way," I admitted, "yes. I suppose I did. So what?"

"You see, officer? Hard as nails. I suspected all along that he was the criminal type."

"Joe!" cried Doris. "Joe, don't talk. Let me get you a lawyer—"

"Quiet, young lady!" snapped the boss. "Now, Grady . . . since you've gone this far, will you admit the rest? Will you confess to having stolen company plans and sold them to outside interests?"

I stared at him numbly. "Are you crazy? I never stole anything in my life! Or sold any information."

"Oh, no? Is it not true that you showed this young lady—" He designated Winifred with a nod—"a considerable sum of money, and confided to her that it was an advance from a friend for some information you were to supply him later?"

I cried, "But, for Pete's sake—" Then I stopped dead, realizing with despair how fantastic must sound any explanation I could offer. Who would ever believe my story about Norvell? "But, for P-Pete's sake—" I faltered.

"Okay!" grunted one of the cops. "Okay, pal, let's get going! Looks like you're going to have plenty of time in hinkey to think these things over—what with this affair and a counterfeiting rap."

"A counterfeiting rap? Did I do *that*, too?"

Clancy spoke up mournfully. "You shouldn't have done

me that way, Mr. Grady. I always thought me an' you was good friends, so I did. It was a dirty trick, it was, an' me acceptin' your money like it was good as gold. Why did you do it? To me, I mean?"

I said carefully, "Look, gentlemen . . . I have already blundered into one misunderstanding that threatens to deprive me of life, liberty, and the pursuit of further sappiness. I do not, however, have the faintest idea what lies behind this new complaint. If there is any sanity left in this mob, will someone please explain what this is all about?"

The man with the long face looked at the bald-headed man. "You tell him, Mr. Squeers. It was your bank that discovered the forgery."

Squeers nodded.

"Has he any more of the money on him?" he asked the policemen.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Get your hand out of my—"

"Here you are, Mr. Squeers." The cop tossed him my bankroll. The cashier inspected it swiftly, nodded.

"Yes. Just like the rest. A most inept job; most! Obviously the work of a rank amateur."

"Meaning—?" I demanded.

"Meaning, Mr. Grady, that you made an inconceivably stupid blunder when you forged these counterfeit bills. I've seen a great deal of what you underworld characters call—uh—wallpaper. But never have I seen such excellent engraving utterly ruined by such carelessness."

"Talk sense, man! What's wrong with that money?"

He smiled thinly. "Nothing, Mr. Grady. Except that it's signed by two persons who never held public office . . . and that the series designated will not be issued for another decade!"

He passed me a bill, and I studied it with mounting despair. There's no doubt about it, it's always best to read the

small print. The notes my nephew Norvell had so thoughtfully sent me were signed by *T. M. Cardovan, Treasurer of the United States,* and *Walter B. Gurk, Secretary of the Treasury.* And above the second signature was the legend: *Series 1956 B . . .*

Well . . . that's about all. The rest is routine stuff that wouldn't interest you. How they tossed me in the clink, and I got the bright idea of asking Mrs. McGill to testify on my behalf, and it turned out *she* was suing me, too, for three weeks' room rent. How Doris went to the boys at the plant and begged them to explain that it had all been a practical joke, and those stinkers let on they didn't know anything about it. How the newspapers got wind of the story and played it up big for laughs, and Winifred's father pledged to kick me out if I ever entered his house again . . . and how the F-Z Payment Gemme Shoppe refused to give me a refund on the engagement ring I turned back to them.

It was Doris who wound up the whole mess, I guess. Anyhow, it was she who soft-talked the boss into dropping the company's charges against me after he found behind the filing cabinet the plans he said I'd stolen. And it was Doris who got Clancy, the bank, and the rest of my victims to withdraw their suits on the condition I make good their financial losses. Finally, it was Doris who pointed out to the coppers that they really had no case against me until they proved I'd deliberately manufactured and passed those phony bills—with intent to defraud—so after a while, for lack of evidence, they let me go.

So it all just sort of petered out. There wasn't a happy ending, like in a story. There just wasn't *any* ending . . . except that I'm getting out of this burg as soon as I've tied up a few loose ends. And good riddance! I stepped into this

mess with my eyes open, and I'll take my medicine. But Doris agrees with me that I got a kicking around for being a trusting soul.

Of course I had to tell Doris the whole story when she was trying to help me. Nice girl, Doris. She'll make some guy a good wife some day. A guy who likes women, that is. Me, I'm brokenhearted. There'll never be another love for me . . .

But you've got to hand it to Doris. She's right in there. She listened to my story and didn't bat an eyelash. Except once. That was when I mentioned Sandusky.

"Sandusky?" she repeated oddly. "Sandusky, Ohio?"

"That's right," I said. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing," she said, "except that I just happened to think . . . my mother and dad live there. It's a pretty place. Quiet, too." She hesitated, casting me a thoughtful, sidelong glance. "Joe, after this affair is all cleaned up, do you still want to do what you said? I mean go into business for yourself? Inventing, and all that?"

"I do," I declared firmly. "Even if my nephew Norvell *was* a phony he gave me some good ideas. Why?"

"Well, why don't you come home to Sandusky with me? Dad has a toolshed behind the house. It could be converted into a laboratory in no time at all, at practically no expense. He'd be glad to let you use it till you get on your feet again."

"For free? I'm dead broke, you know."

"That doesn't matter. Dad's a gambler." She smiled at me, that funny little half smile again. "We're all gamblers in our family. But we know a good thing when we see it."

A strange kid, Doris. I don't understand her half the time, but she's okay. I nodded.

"All right. Then that's the ticket. Sure is funny how things work out, isn't it? When that smart aleck 'nephew'

of mine gave me that doubletalk about Sandusky I'll bet he never dreamed I'd be moving there within a month."

So, as I said when I started, I'm not asking favors from anybody, and I don't want any more trouble. I know what I'm going to do, and as soon as I straighten matters out with the E-Z Payment Gemme Shoppe, I'll be on my way.

Only it does hurt, because of course there'll never be another girl but Winifred for me, and I did think the boys at the plant liked me. And some day I would like to find out who that guy was—the one who pretended to be my nephew Norvell, I mean—and I'd also like to know how he got out of my room that night.

He was a nice guy. I liked him from the start. He looked an awful lot like someone I know. But I can't for the life of me figure out who it is . . . except that when he smiled, it was a funny little half smile. Sort of like Doris . . .

II

The Ring

The Gripes of Wraith

The Cunning of the Beast

THE RING

You have gained a ring.
What of it? 'Tis a figure, a symbol, say;
A thing's sign: now for the thing signified.

MULLER first saw the ring at an auction. There were many auctions in those days. Men, even vanquished men, must eat. So they disposed of their most cherished possessions for staggering sums—sums which were actually a pittance, because in postwar Germany, the Germany of 1923, it cost three billion marks to mail a postcard, ten billion for a loaf of bread.

It was an economy of chaos where housewives and tradesmen haggled in figures formerly used only by astronomers computing the distances to stars. Lifetime savings were drowned in the flood of presses that gushed forth new currency as fast as the old became valueless. Women trundled to market barrowloads of print which—if the shopper hurried—might buy enough food for one good meal. The walls of a room could be papered with marks less costly than wallpaper itself.

Muller was more fortunate than most of his countrymen. After the war, the New York daily for which he had been correspondent gave him back his old job, that of covering the news from the bedlam that was Berlin. He was paid, not in reichsmarks, but in good American gold. Thus, though the pay was meager, he got by . . .

The ring was a curious piece: antique gold, ponderously conceived and elaborately executed in a somehow weirdly macabre serpentine design. Why he bid on it, Muller did not know. Possibly because its grotesquerie fascinated him. Or because a latent imperialism was titillated by the auctioneer's provocative hint that it had been "a Crown piece, gentlemen. From the Kaiser's own personal collection." Or perhaps simply because the ring was offered, he had the money with which to bid, and he had never been able to resist the challenge of a public auction.

Whatever his original reason, it was certainly this latter which sharpened his interest when he heard three successive bids topped by a thin voice at the far end of the hall. For Muller thus to be thwarted was to double his interest in an objective. Consequently he called his new offering, *"One trillion marks!"* in a tone of cold determination which he hoped might discourage his competitor.

After a moment's pause the thin voice raised the bid to one and a quarter. So Muller's attempt did not bring the desired result. But it *did* bring him a visitor. Even as the auctioneer's gaze queried Muller's response to this new offer, the crowd parted and a small man thrust his way to Muller's side.

"If you please, sir—" he said.

Muller was surprised to discover his competitor was a member of the clergy; an old man, a priest.

"Yes, Father?" he said.

"The ring—" faltered the priest. "I beg of you, sir . . . bid upon it no longer."

Muller stared at the small man curiously.

"But, really—" he began.

"It is of the utmost importance. Believe me, sir, you cannot, *must* not—"

Muller roused suddenly to the realization that the auc-

tioneer, hearing no higher bid, had twice cried the sale of the ring to his competitor. *"Going!"* he was calling. *"Going for one and a quarter—"*

Barely in time Muller stopped him.

"Two!" he cried.

The auctioneer smiled and began shaking the new bid like a banner before his audience. The priest stared helplessly at Muller. *"Please,* sir!" he repeated. "You do not understand. This ring, it is—" He turned abruptly. *"Two and a half!"* he called.

Muller stirred fretfully. "But, *why?*" he demanded. "Why is it so important to you? You, a man of the cloth . . . what do you want with jewelry? What earthly reason—?"

"I can't explain now," begged the priest. "There is no time. It is no earthly reason, but . . . another. You must not buy it. No one must buy the ring but myself. There is a history, a legend—"

He chose a poor argument. His words only succeeded in increasing Muller's desire to own the piece. Muller no longer doubted that the ring indeed somehow had found its way into this cheap auction house from the erstwhile Kaiser's coffers. It was perhaps an imperial signet, or some rare and ancient *objet d'art,* possibly a notorious poison-ring from medieval days. Whatever its history or purpose, Muller was determined to have it if the price lay within his range.

Quietly he said, "I'm sorry, Father. But I, too, want the ring." And turning to the bench, *"Three trillion!"* he called.

The little priest watched miserably as Muller went forward to claim his purchase, pressing through a crowd which hummed with pleased excitement. There is magic in numbers, and three trillions of marks sounded like a

fabulous price . . . even though its true value was no more than thirty American dollars.

The ring was a trifle large, but Muller wore it home. He and his wife rented a small furnished flat in a middle-class residential district. It was a wretched place, but the best they could afford. The drains were bad, the roof leaked when it rained, and the apartment was sadly in need of both painting and repapering. Muller had mentioned these things several times to his landlord, but with no success. A firm demand might have brought results. But Muller, in simple truth, was rather afraid of the landlord, a fierce old Prussian with brows like thunderclouds and great mustachios bristling with challenge.

The neighborhood, never better than mediocre, was not improved by postwar conditions. Everywhere was hunger and poverty, near-anarchy. The worst problem was that of the soldiers returned from the front. For four long years they had dwelt with death and violence; they did not now find it easy to compromise with a fate that brought worn heroes home to starve.

Freed from military restraint they had become a law unto themselves. When they disliked a thing they spoke up openly and loudly against it. When they were angered, they did not argue . . . they struck. When they were hungry, they ate . . . and where or how they got food was only their concern and that of those from whom they stole.

Thus it was not surprising that as Muller turned into his street he heard cries of anger and fear, and as he neared a greengrocer's tiny shop he saw three ex-soldiers assaulting its owner, his neighbor.

What *is* surprising is that Muller did something about it. In those days it was wisdom under such circumstances to bawl for the police, seek shelter from the thieves' venge-

ance, and hope for the best. Had Muller stopped to think twice he might have done just that, for he was not a notably courageous man.

But it was instinct, not logic, which governed his reflexes. He raced suddenly forward, shouting as he ran, and before he himself realized what he was doing he was fifth party to the little drama.

The bandits whirled, reaching for guns. But somehow it did not occur to Muller to be afraid. His brain was inflamed with a fierce and almost holy rage. It was as if some inner conviction of right imbued him with a power transcending petty fears. He knew a reckless, half-impatient contempt for his antagonists; for an instant he understood the mad gallantry of Don Quixote striking spur against the whirling windsails, knew the impulse which caused de Bergerac, beset by a hundred hirelings, to laugh defiance at their blackguard blades, crying, "*Bring me giants!*"

Sheer impetus swept him forward, and before the nearest thug cried warning Muller was upon him, in a single motion smashing the Lüger from his grasp, scooping it up, and turning it against the befuddled trio.

It occurred to him later that his speech and actions were like something from a very poor play.

"Drop your guns, all of you," he cried. "And raise your hands. I'll shoot the first scoundrel who moves!"

But, melodrama or not, his command brought instant response. The thieves froze in their tracks, moving no muscle until the police came. The greengrocer, beside himself with gratitude, wept salty thanks.

Muller was, he could not deny, considerably set up over his little adventure. Rather complacently he conceded he had acquitted himself rather well in a difficult situation. As he climbed the steps to his flat, he was mentally review-

ing the story he should tell Hilda. With proper modesty, to be sure, but at the same time making it quite clear that he had struck a neatly heroic figure in the action.

Unfortunately, his tale was delayed in the telling. Hilda met him at the door. She had been crying. Wordlessly she held forth a slip of paper, a cablegram from his New York employers. Or erstwhile employers. For that, in effect, was the cable's message. In crisp sentences it informed Muller that effective immediately his guaranteed monthly salary was discontinued, that in the future he would be paid a flat word rate plus cable costs on such news items as were accepted.

Muller stared at the devastating notice, stricken. It meant for him, as well he knew, and as his employers must also have known, utter disaster. It was only the assurance of a regular income that enabled him to exist under Berlin's precarious economy. With such guarantee removed, he no longer had the means with which to buy his way into those furtive inner channels of diplomacy which were his news sources; such bribes became pure speculation. With the additional cost of prepaying cable fees which might—but also might not!—be assumed at the other end, his entire job became a desperate gamble with fate that each week would offer at least one newsworthy story.

He wet dry lips. "When did this come?" he asked.

"An hour ago," said Hilda. Her white lips thinned to angry lines. "It's your own fault," she accused. "You brought this on yourself. You, with your dreary stories of breadlines and riots, poverty, misery—"

"I write the truth," said Muller. "Those things exist. They're news."

"Not the news America wants to hear," she retorted. "The war is over. They want to forget about it. They're not vengeful. They don't want to gloat forever over the

downfall of a former enemy. I've told you all along you should send them bright stories, gay society comments, inside hints on Government scandals."

Muller only half heard her. His thoughts were seething at the rank injustice of this message. He neither would, nor wished to, argue with Hilda the truth of her accusations. All he knew was that a dreadful wrong had been committed. He had been a good correspondent, faithfully performing a newspaper man's proper function: that of reporting vital news events as he sees them. To be cast thus to the wolves without being allowed to speak a word in his own behalf roused in him a sudden fury completely submerging his first sick sense of despair. His hands clenched at his sides and a fierce rebellion trembled through him. His anger was a wave that bore on its crest defiance and a sense of power illimitable.

He crumpled the cablegram in one fist, hurled it to the floor, strode to the telephone.

"—your own fault," complained Hilda, behind him. "If you had followed my advice—"

Muller spoke without turning. His voice was steel cold. "Shut up!" he snapped. Then, to the operator's murmured, *"Bitte?"* he demanded, "Long distance. Overseas division."

Hilda's face was white. Her eyes had widened and she stood with the back of one hand pressed to her lips as if he had struck her. It occurred to Muller in a dim, abstracted fashion that, in effect, that was what he *had* done. Never before had he raised his voice to her in such a manner. He was an easy-going man; he had been an easy-going, submissive husband. But no more.

Her lips worked mutely for a moment. Then, "What are you doing, Otto?" she asked. "Whom are you calling?"

"New York."

"You . . . you're going to ask them to reconsider?"

He shook his head savagely. "No!" he said. "Damn them! I'm going to show them . . . *Yes?*" He turned back to the phone as the operator's voice informed him he had his first connection. "New York," he said.

Hilda started to speak, then said nothing. Muller knew what she was thinking. Only twice before had he ever spoken to New York, and then at the expense of his employers. The cost of such a call was tremendous; it loomed doubly so now his every source of income was cut off. Hilda knew how little ready cash they had on hand. Yet with eyes fixed upon him in a new, strange wonderment, she held her peace.

Muller did not call his old employers. He called, instead, a news syndicate of international renown. The call was pure madness. Muller was a very young journalist; theirs one of the oldest and greatest news-gathering organizations in the world. If they knew Muller's name at all it was but casually, for ninety percent of his stories to America had appeared under the anonymous byline: *"By cable from our special correspondent in Berlin."*

Yet a miracle transpired that day. Not only did his call go through; it found the ear of the Foreign Editor himself. He listened as Muller explained briefly who he was, his background, his capabilities. Then the editor spoke, and the impossible happened.

"Muller, eh?" he said. "Heard of you. Well, Muller, you called at just the right time. Two hours ago, in a staff conference, we decided to resume German coverage on a prewar basis. We're coordinating the activities of all our correspondents over there and establishing a branch office in Berlin. Think you're capable of handling the job?"

Bring me giants!

"I am," said Muller calmly.

"Very well," said the cool, metallic voice. "We'll give you a try. Rent an office immediately, equip it, and send us an itemized account of expenses. We'll cable you the names of your new staff and résumé of your duties. Oh, by the way, about salary: the job pays a hundred a week."

"A hundred—"

"More if you make good," said his new employer. "Goodbye, Muller."

And the connection was broken.

Muller turned to his wife, weak with belated comprehension of his own daring, but transcendently happy. She read the triumph in his eyes and moved forward.

"Otto—" she said hesitantly. "Otto—"

He told her then . . . or started to. He didn't finish, for she moved still closer, laying her cheek against his. "I'm sorry, Otto," she whispered. "You were right. Forgive me, my dear."

It was luck, of course. Such a stroke of fortune as comes but once in a lifetime. Muller learned afterward that Henderby, the Foreign Editor, was one of those crisp Yankees who pride themselves on snap decisions. A spur-of-the-moment man. To that fact, and that the need for such a man as Muller had arisen two short hours before he called, Muller owed his job.

On the strength of his newly won affluence Muller—after telling off the outraged landlord in no uncertain language—gave up his old flat and rented a new one in a better residential section, transferring to a hotel until the new apartment should be ready for occupancy.

It was the first time in their married years that he and Hilda had been able to afford even the minor luxuries of life. Hilda, thrilled as a bride, hurled herself joyfully into

the task of furnishing a home to her heart's desire, while Muller turned himself to the equally pleasant job of setting up press headquarters.

A week later they moved into their new apartment. The promised repairs were not yet quite complete. The woodwork had been repainted, the floors sanded and waxed till they glistened, but the paperhangers were a day behind schedule. The landlord apologized for this, blaming the decorator, an ancient Bavarian.

He in turn shrugged and complained, "*Grosser Gott*, what can I do with the labor situation what it is? Such worthless, good-for-nothing help I get these days—"

He jerked his head contemptuously toward a shiftless assistant lethargically setting the scaffold; a lean, pimply young man with sullen eyes.

Hilda laughed. "It doesn't matter, Otto. They'll be finished by tonight. And then we'll have our own lovely home . . . at last." She kissed him with the deft preoccupation of a wife whose thoughts are on more important matters. "Now run along to work. I'll see you at suppertime."

"Yes," said Muller. "Goodbye, my dear." Then, remembering, he stripped the ring from his finger. "By the way, if you should go down the street this afternoon, leave this with Pfleuger, the jeweler. It's a trifle large; I've almost lost it several times."

Then he went to his office.

He was surprised to find a visitor awaiting him. It was the little priest of the auction house. He stirred forward eagerly as Muller entered.

"Herr Muller?" he said. "I'm so glad to find you at last. I have been trying all over town to learn your name. The auctioneers didn't know, and it was terribly important that—" He stopped suddenly. His eyes, seeking Muller's

hands, clouded. His voice was strident with a note of panic. "The . . . the ring, Herr Muller?" he demanded. "You have not lost it? Or given it away?"

"No," said Muller. "The ring is at my home. It is to be repaired."

"Thank God!" said the priest. "It is about the ring I have come. Herr Muller, please . . . it was three trillion marks you paid for the ring, was it not? That day I could not compete against you. But when necessity prods, even a priest must find money. I have scraped together all I could get—"

He drew from his pocket a tumbled pile of bills, set them on the desk between them beseechingly.

"Not *three,* but *ten* trillion, Herr Muller. Will you take it for the ring, accepting at once a handsome profit . . . and the thanks of an aged man?"

"But, my dear sir," said Muller a bit impatiently, "I don't wish to sell the ring. It is not a question of money. I bought it because I liked it, wanted it. And besides, it has become a sort of . . . well, you might say good-luck piece—"

"No!" interrupted his visitor sharply. "You don't know what you're saying. Not good luck, no! The reverse."

"I beg your pardon?" said Muller querulously.

The small man sighed deeply, seeming to ponder deep within himself for a long moment.

"My son," he said at last, "I suppose I shall have to tell you. I did not want to if it could be avoided. But since you refuse to part with the ring I must tell you why I want it so desperately. Why neither you nor any other man must be permitted to hold it in his possession."

"Any man?" repeated Muller. "But *you* want it."

The old man met his gaze firmly. There was unwavering candor in his eyes and in his voice.

"Not for myself, my son. I want the ring in order that I may exorcise . . . and destroy it."

Muller stared at him in blank bewilderment. There was something in the priest's tone which inveighed with all the dread solemnity of a High Mass.

"Exorcise . . . and destroy?" he repeated.

The priest nodded, choosing his words with deliberate care.

"What I am about to say you may find strange, Herr Muller. We of the Church are straightforward men, living —or striving to—in the uncovert ways of righteousness and light. We attempt to discourage mysticism and superstition; these are false branches on the tree of knowledge.

"Yet we are not fools. We who have delved into the story of mankind know that all things are not easily explainable, that all things are not clean and godly. There stir in the world today, as in that Garden millennia ago, purposes dark and subtle, designed toward the overthrow of all that is good and noble in mankind.

"These are the forces of evil. Such a force is embodied in the ring you own."

"Force," said Muller, "embodied in an inanimate object? But, Father—"

The priest lifted a lean white hand in admonition.

"Be not too swift to scoff, my son. We have ample reason to believe that some inanimate objects have a life peculiarly their own. The legend of the power of Solomon's Seal —which is to say Solomon's signet—is too widespread to brook easy dismissal. There was the rod of Moses, and the cup of Joseph of Arimathaea, the Grail from which Our Lord drank on the last eve. These things are symbols of divine strength and truth. But they have their evil counterpart in other things. The witches' broom, the necromancer's wand, and . . . the Ring of Judas."

"Ring of Judas?" repeated Muller.

The old man nodded soberly.

"That is what I have called it. Studying the ring's tragic history, I have traced its ownership—with many gaps—back through the centuries to that unhappy traitor. Where he got it, if from some still more ancient bearer of misery or no, I have no way of guessing.

"But since the day greed stirred Iscariot to sell earth's Saviour for a slender purse of coins, the history of this ring's ownership is one of terrible, brief grandeur followed by black tragedy.

"I do not know how many men have worn the ring. But certain names I *do* know. From writings I have read, from ancient paintings whereupon is depicted the serpentine coil of power. Caesar Augustus, Tiberius and Nero . . . these one time owned the ring. Later, fierce Attila, Saladin and Genghis Khan.

"Philip of Spain wore the ring when his golden galleons scourged the seven seas. It weighted the Prussian Frederick's rheumy fingers when he set a world ablaze, and its evil aura inspired Napoleon to conquest and destruction. Lately, as the auctioneer truly told, it was the possession of Wilhelm of Hohenzollern. And today," he finished somberly. "the ring is yours . . . and the evil power thereof."

"But the power of this ring?" asked Muller. "What is this evil?"

"Must you ask, my son? Do you not see the dreadful parallel in the lives of all those men? This is the curse of Iscariot's ring: that he who wears it shall aspire and win to world-shaking greatness. The strength to sway men's minds is his, and power illimitable with which to achieve his purposes.

"But always, at the end, shall this power be warped to a design of grief and misery for mankind. And as for the

owner himself, his life shall end in violent death or bleak despair."

Muller stared at the old man. The story was incredible, of course. Fantastic. Or . . . was it? Muller found himself recalling suddenly the small but curious incidents which had befallen him recently.

There was that episode with the thieves. Never before had he known such vast, almost contemptuous sense of power as during that short interlude. Then his relationship with Hilda, which during this past week had subtlely changed somehow. A small thing, but it was he who directed, now; she who obeyed.

More important was the matter of his new job, its winning and its scope. Power. Power not measurable in world-shaking emphasis *yet*, true. But . . . later?

Reluctantly, he found himself acknowledging there might be something in what the old priest warned. It occurred to him suddenly that today, for the first time since he had won and worn the ring, he felt more placid. During the past week he had been possessed of a strange new confidence in himself, in his judgment, his capabilities; he felt an almost headstrong cocksureness of his own rightness in all things. Was this the power of the ring? Muller did not know. But a gathering doubt warned him that it was.

There was another point . . . irrelevant perhaps, but significant. The purchase price of the ring. A fantastic price of three trillion marks. It had no apparent analogy in the ring's history. But when one stopped to consider it, that sum—translated into older terms—amounted to precisely the amount for which the ring's first owner had sold the life of his Friend. Thirty pieces of silver.

It was this last thought which made Muller's decision

for him. He was not a specially devout man, but he tried to be logical. And it seemed to him that here was evidence too weighty to be lightly dismissed.

By acceding to the old priest's request, he had nothing to lose, but—perhaps—everything to gain. If the ring were in truth a ring of power it had achieved enough of its purpose for him. He held now all the rank and authority to which he aspired. He felt no urge to become a molder of destinies.

He nodded. "Very well, Father," he said. "I don't pretend to understand, and I'm not sure I believe . . . quite. But you shall have the ring."

At Muller's apartment they found Hilda wearily but happily erasing the last vestiges of the decorator's labors. She was embarrassed at meeting a clergyman in her dishabille, but Muller cut short her apologies.

"The ring, Hilda? Did you take it to Pfleuger?"

"Not yet. I had planned to go later this afternoon. I'll get it for you."

She disappeared into the bedroom recently cleared by the old Bavarian, who was now methodically removing the paraphernalia of his trade. She returned in a moment, puzzled.

"It doesn't seem to be there, Otto."

"It must be there," said Muller.

"I know. I put it on the bureau. I remember perfectly."

"It can't have grown legs and walked away," said Muller impatiently. "There's been no one in the house but you and—"

He nodded toward the old paperhanger, who shuffled forward.

"Your good wife is right, Herr Muller," he said. "It

was on the bureau. I saw it myself, when my assistant—"

He stopped suddenly, his old eyes abruptly clouding. Muller read the meaning of his hesitation.

"Yes? Your assistant. Where is he?"

"He is . . . gone," said the old man.

"Gone? Gone where?"

"I don't know. This was his last day with me. He was going home . . . somewhere in the south of Germany."

"Then *he* took it!" stormed Muller. "He is a common, pilfering thief."

The old Bavarian twisted his hands in honest agony. "Maybe so, Herr Muller. I cannot say. I did not know him well. He was a new man . . . an ex-soldier. We cannot pick and choose these days."

"Of course," interrupted the priest gently. "It is not your fault, my friend. But we must find him, get back the ring. Where is his home?"

The old man shook his head. "That I do not know."

"But, confound it," said Muller, "you must know *something* about him. *Who* is he? We'll set the police after him. What was his name?"

The Bavarian whined, "It is not my fault, Herr Muller. I am sorry. I will pay for the ring. I did not know—"

"His name, old windbag! Tell us!"

"Name?" said the old man. "Ah, yes . . . his name. *Ach*, he is a bad one, that one. I curse the day I ever laid eyes upon him . . . common little thief! His name is Shicklgruber. But it is Hitler he calls himself these days . . . Adolf Hitler."

THE GRIPES OF WRAITH

Ghosts have just as good a right,
In every way, to fear the light,
As Men to fear the dark.

"DO YOU," queried Squaredeal Sam McGhee abruptly, "believe in ghosts?"

The old gambler, con and carny man had been sitting quietly and patiently in my office for the past hour, waiting for me to finish my latest masterpiece. Now, as I patted the sheets into a tidy oblong he opened his attack, coincidentally bending forward to help himself to one of my cigars.

I grinned, recognizing the gambit as one of the old rascal's inimitable preludes to a touch, a sort of narrative hook calculated to pique my curiosity and collar my dollars. Denial being his obvious objective, I countered with a nod.

"But of course," I replied. "I'm an ardent believer in spirits. Maybe I'm ghoulish that way, but I can't help it; it runs in the family. My dad's triplet cousins died three sheets in the wind. My great-uncle, Eerie McSlug, was a phantomweight boxer. And my sister's house has spooks in the kitchen."

"Spooks in the kitchen?"

"That's right. She's got h'ants in her pantry."

"Funny man!" frowned Sam reprovingly. "Life o' the party! I'm sorry I tooken up so much of your time. I'll run along so's you can get back to readin' your Joe Miller."

He rose, reaching for his weatherbeaten derby, but I chuckled and shoved him back in his chair.

"Calm down, chum. I was only gagging."

"On them jokes," said Sam, "I would too."

"But since we seem to be on the subject of spirits, I've got *proof* of their existence here," I said, rummaging in my desk drawer. "*100 proof*. Sure you have to leave?"

"Well, now," McGhee settled back, appraising my peace offering with a competently appreciative eye, "come to think of it, I got nothin' to do which can't wait a couple o' fingers . . . I mean hours. Easy on that there seltzer water. It gives a guy awful headaches."

I poured and passed.

"You were saying something about ghosts?"

Sam shrugged. "It don't matter. Skip it."

"But," I said, "I'm interested. You've had some sort of unnerving experience with the supernatural?"

"Yes," said Sam, "an' no. That is, I had a sort of experience, an' it got on my nerves . . . only not in the way you might think. If you can spare another drop of that snakebite remedy—?"

I poured.

"When!" said Sam as the liquor ran over the edge of his glass. He sighed contentedly and lifted his high-topped shoes to the surface of my desk. "Well, it was like this. I guess you know there's a housing shortage—"

I guess you know (said Squaredeal Sam), there's a housing shortage these days. Houses for sale is as rare as boogie beats in a Salvation Army concert; rental properties has all been rented at terrific rates by smart alecks who rented their *own* rental properties at terrific rates. An' as for apartments . . . well, a friend o' mine that works for the telephone company told me that one o' their public phones

was reported out of order, an' before he could get into the booth to repair it he had to dispossess a guy who was livin' there with his wife, three kids an' a maiden aunt.

Of course (allowed Sam), he might o' been exaggeratin' a trifle. I don't see how there was room enough in that booth for a maiden aunt.

Anyhow, the sitchyation looked pretty hopeless when I blew back into town atter a winter of greasin' palms in the beach of the same name. Florida's a great place for folks in their old age . . . an' it helps them get there faster, too. You go down for a change and a rest; the bellboy gets the change, an' the hotel gets the rest. The day I checked out they give me a bill which looked like the distance to the farthest star computed in inches, an' if I hadn't been able to leave behind me a suitcase containin' ten thousand shares in a copper mine which may be discovered in Colorado some day, I would o' felt mighty guilty slidin' down that rainspout.

Imagine my surprise, then, when the day atter I hit town I was strollin' through a nice residential district an' *bingo!* there's a fine-lookin' house with a placard hangin' on the front door: *Room To Let.*

My first thought was that the Health Department had run short of smallpox quarantines, but sure enough, it turned out to be the real McCoy. A wizened-up little old guy with a nose like a mildewed gherkin said yes, he had a room to rent, an' no, it hadn't been spoken for, an' if I didn't mind that would be two weeks in advance, please.

I said, "Now, wait a minute, Mr.—"

"Snead," he admitted. "Ephraim Snead."

"Leave us not be im*pee*tuous about this," I said. "How do I know I'm goin' to like this room? I ain't even seen it."

"Oh, you'll like it," he guaranteed eagerly. "It's the finest room in the house; large, sunny and cheerful."

"An' as far as rent's concerned," I continued, "I'll have to ast you to wait a few days till I get myself lined up. I just got back from a long vacation, an' I'm temporarily what the economists call financially astringent.

"However," I told him, "as anybody in show business can tell you, Sam McGhee is as square as the sum of the hypothesis. So if you don't mind puttin' me on the cuff for a short time—?"

Old Picklepuss frowned, an' for a couple o' seconds I thought I was goin' to continue collectin' my bills in care of General Delivery. But finally he shrugged an' puckered up in what he used for a smile. "Very well," he said. "I guess that will be all right. This way, please." An' he showed me up a flight of stairs to the front room on the second floor.

Right then an' there I ought to have knew there was somethin' smelly in Sweden. In the first place, this Ephraim Snead character wasn't the type to dole out somethin' for nothin'. He wore suspenders an' a belt, both . . . the sure sign of a canny joe. Also, he had them calluses between the pointin' finger an' thumb which is the sign of either a pro gambler or a miser, an' from personal acquaintance I knew he wasn't the former. Finally, the room itself was just what he had claimed . . . large an' sunny an' cheerful. Things bein' how they are, the only good reason for it bein' vacant had to be a bad one.

But I didn't stop to think of them things. I grabbed one gander at the environs an' told Uncle Eph to take down the *To Let* sign. When he'd disappeared I took off my coat, flopped myself acrost a huge, old-fashioned feather bed . . . an' in two shakes of a cocktail I was lost in the arms of Murphy.

All I meant to do was take a short nap before dinner. But you know how them things is. Like the poet says,

"The best laid plans o' mice an' men oft gang up on a guy." I was poohed an' the bed was soft. One wink led to another till when I finally woke up it was past midnight an' the room was as black as a bride's biscuits.

That is, it *should* have been black. But it wasn't; not completely. Over in the lounge chair that set beside the fireplace there was a funny, wriggly, grayish sort of a *glow*. Not a light, exactly. More like the reflection of a wore-out lightnin'-bug's tail light seen in a steamed mirror through a pair of dark glasses. Kind of fuzzy an' uncertain.

I sat bolt upright in bed. "Hey!" I said. "What goes on here?"

The minute I spoke, the glow brightened an' become a shape . . . the shape of a man. It turned its head, stared at me for a split second . . . then screamed bloody murder.

Sam sighed reflectively as he scrubbed a pyramid of cigar ash into the nap of my carpet. I frowned at him.

"*It* screamed bloody murder?" I repeated. "You mean *you* did, don't you?"

"I mean *it* did," said Sam. "Or rather, *he* did."

"But if it was really a ghost you saw—"

"He was a ghost," Sam asseverated, "an' it was him that hollered. You see, he was scared of humans."

I stared at him. "He was which?"

"Nothin' of the sort," said my friend. "Witches is wenches. Edgar was a plain old-fashioned he-male spook."

"Edgar?"

"That was his name. Of course, I didn't learn that till later. First I had to quiet him down. He was a nervous wrench."

This Edgar (continued Squaredeal Sam McGhee), was a nervous wrench if ever I seen one. He not only screamed

when he seen me, he also leaped out o' that chair an' started runnin' around the room in circles like a will-o'-the-wisp bein' chased by a merry-go-round.

The exercise apparently charged his generator, too, because he kept gettin' brighter an' brighter an' solider and solider, until when at last I got him cornered between the highboy an' the washstand he was emittin' enough candlepower to read fine print by. Also, in case you ever write a ghost story, you might want to know what he felt like. Well, like a cobweb, only transparenter an' resilienter. You could poke a finger right through him an' it didn't bother him. He popped right back together again when you pulled out your pinky.

An' he was cold, too . . . colder than that brass monkey people keep talkin' about. A funny kind of cold that when you touched him crawled through your veins like frosted caterpillars.

I darn near got chilblains doin' it, but eventually I made him stand still an' stop his God-awful bleatin'. When his wails had subsided to a whimper, I give him what for.

"You're a fine one!" I scolded. "Such a commotion. What are you tryin' to do . . . raise the dead?"

He said sulkily, "You snuck up on me. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, picking on a poor bodiless spirit."

"You're the one," I said, "who ought to be ashamed. The idea of a great big spook like you jumpin' out of his ectoplasm just because somebody speaks to him. You're supposed to scare people, not vicey-versy."

Edgar said, "Yes, but—" an' brooded for a minute. Then he nodded. "Okay. Maybe you got something there. *Boo!*"

An' he pulled an awful face at me, or what was supposed to be an awful face. But on him, with his big sad eyes an' mournful mouth, it just looked ridiculous. I pulled one right back at him, an' squiggled my fingers in his face.

"Boo yourself," I chuckled, "an' see how you— Hey! Come down offen there."

Because the minute I booed at him he skinned up the wall like a startled chemise, whisked acrost the ceiling, an' perched on the chandelier tremblin' like he had the egg.

"Don't *do* that!" he wailed. "I can't stand it. It hurts my astral spirit!"

"An' you give *me* a pain, too," I snorted. "What's the matter with you? Ain't you got *any* courage at all?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he snapped pettishly. "If I had any guts, I wouldn't be a ghost, would I?"

He groaned, an' two big tears rolled down his cheeks. "You don't know how horrible it is to be a wraith," he said. "Up all night . . . nothing but a nasty old winding-sheet to wear . . . no friends to talk to. And cold, horribly cold, all the time." He sneezed to prove his point. I stared at him thoughtfully.

"What you need," I decided, "is a good stiff drink. Come down here an' I'll treat you to a snort of bottled anti-freeze. Stop frownin'. It's good stuff. Guaranteed to make you see pink elephants . . . an' other beasts of bourbon."

But Edgar shook his head.

"It's no use," he said dolefully. "I can't drink. I'm a ghost. Liquor would go right through me."

"That," I frowned, "complicates things. But then, I always heard you shouldn't mix your spirits—" A flash of inspiration hit me. "Wait a minute. You could drink the *ghost* of a drink, couldn't you?"

He looked dubious. "I suppose so. I never tried."

"So atter I've tooken a drink," I told him, "it's a gone goose, no? You've heard of 'dead soldiers,' ain't you?"

His eyes brightened. "Empty bottles, you mean? Of course! Do you really think it will work?"

"There's no harm in tryin'," I said. "Here's how!" I got

out a bottle of my favorite lumbago lotion, poured four fingers into a glass, an' drained it in one gulp. Then I handed him the empty glass, which he held onto with an effort . . . but it wasn't an *empty* glass no longer. Because, you see, I had *killed* that drink! When he lifted the glass to his lips I seen a pale, shimmery, yellowish mist sloshin' around in it; the identical twin to the drink I'd just swallowed, only ghostlier. An' it had an identical effect, too, only in technicolor. As it run down Edgar's eerie canal he started gettin' brighter, warmer, an' cheerfuller, till when he'd assimilated it all he looked exactly like a lemon soufflé with a cherry in its middle."

Sam paused and glanced at me sidewise. "I reckon," he ventured, "you find this a mite hard to believe?"

"Oh no!" I assured him sanguinely. "I can believe anything. I'm the original Wide-Eyed William . . . the *naif* soul Dean Swift had in mind when he wrote *Gullible's Travels.* I believe radio commercials, the campaign speeches of politicians and the daily weather forecasts. I believe in deodorants, telepathy and the sanctity of womanhood. I believe that time heals all wounds, honesty is the best policy, and many a mickle makes a muckle. I believe—"

"You're a cynic," said McGhee reproachfully, "an' I don't mean the kind where you wash the dishes. You've got a mean, suspicious mind, an' I bet you look under the crust of pies before you taste 'em.

"Just the same, you'd believe this story if you had seen that room. It *looked* like a room in a haunted house. I studied it carefully while me an' Edgar polished off the contents of that bottle. It had old-timey horsehair furnishings an' block-linen wallpaper with a design that almost

drove you nuts tryin' to folly it with your eyes. Between slugs, Edgar pointed out how the old woodwork was carved, an' how the windows was deep-set between long, upright columns—"

"Pilastered?" I asked.

"Edgar?" replied McGhee. "I'll say! To the gills! As a matter of fact, we both was."

Despite the fact (continued Squaredeal Sam McGhee), that we was lookin' at the windows, neither of us was feelin' any pain. Ordinarily, I'm a pretty fair hand at punishin' demon rum, but I hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast, which left me a pushover for a hangover.

Furthermore, Edgar had a thirst that was absolutely out of this world . . . which same is understandable considerin' the fact that he hadn't had a drink since the day he shoveled off this mortal coil. An' of course he couldn't take a drink until I'd already tooken its material predecessor, so you can see where that put *me*. Right under the table.

In fifteen minutes we had swapped names, addresses, an' telephone numbers; a half bottle later we was harmonizin' on such old spirituals as *"A-haunting We Will Go,"* an' *"Genie With the Light Brown Hair,"* not to mention *"Semper Apparition,"* which is the Ghost Guard marchin' song. An' by the time we'd knocked off the quart, Edgar an' me was such bosom companions that he was settin' on my lap, sobbin' out to me the story of his brief, unhappy existence as a human.

It seemed Edgar had been dead a long time. In life he had been a junior clerk at a bank. In his work he handled large amounts o' money. "Thousands of dollars, every day," he told me. "And the sum was my undoing."

He told how one day he come home from work to dis-

cover that completely by accident he had walked off with several hundred dollars' worth of the bank's beans in his jeans.

"The funny part of it was," he said miserably, "the accounts had balanced perfectly at the end of the day. Not a penny out, one way or the other. Yet there I was, stuck with $150.00 that didn't belong to me!"

"*I* should be stuck like that some time," I grunted. "If you ever meet anybody that's looking for a volunteer pincushion—"

"I worried about it all that night," he said. "The next day I went over the books with a fine-tooth comb . . . but I couldn't find the error. It took me four solid days of study to locate it, and as it turned out, I was the only person who could possibly have done so. Unintentionally, I had stumbled across an absolutely foolproof way of defrauding double-entry bookkeeping."

He sighed, an' to take his mind off his woes I give him the butt of a cigarette I'd just crushed out. He dragged on a fresh new ghost-tube comfortably an' continued, "To make things worse, there was no possible way of putting that money back into the accounts. To do so, I would have had to juggle the entries in so obvious a fashion that I would have been caught in jig-time. And for the life of me I couldn't think of any reasonable explanation why I should *put* what appeared to be my personal money into the vaults.

"You've got to believe I didn't want that money. I was ashamed of it, and of myself for embezzling it. That is, at first. But then the war came along and brought inflation with it. Shortages set in, prices rose, and my salary wasn't adequate for my needs. Before I realized it, I had used that $150.00 . . . and my expenses were so high that I needed more.

"And that—" Edgar turned his mournful eyes on me as if pleadin' for understanding—"was the beginning of my downfall. I borrowed a few more hundreds from the bank . . . then a few more . . . and still more . . . till at last one day I discovered to my horror that I had stolen twenty thousand dollars!"

I whistled, noddin' gravely.

"An' then," I guessed, "they caught you?"

"No," said Edgar hollowly, "then, at the nadir of my infamy, I ran away. Not through any dread of being caught. As I've told you, my method was foolproof. My flight was an effort to escape my own conscience. I ran away from my home town and worked my way north, after unbelievable difficulties, to New York.

"Even then my intentions were good. Although I had spent most of the money, I somehow hoped to pay it back. But the week after I rented this room I contracted a severe cold. The cold developed into pneumonia, and—" Edgar groaned dismally—"and here I am. Earthbound to this room for the rest of my immortal existence, because in it I died with a crime on my conscience."

There was a long, awkward silence punctuated only by the sound of his sobbin'. Then I asked, "Isn't there any way you can stop bein' a ghost, Eddie?"

"Only one," he said. "I must atone for my crime."

"You mean pay back the money you borrowed?"

"That's the only way." He looked at me with sudden hope. "Sam," he said, "maybe *you* can help me?"

"Me? How?"

"You're alive. You can get the money I need to pay my debt of honor . . . send it to the Richmond bank I stole it from. Then my soul will be freed. I can go to—"

"Check!" I said. "You can go to! I believe in the good neighbor policy an' all o' that there, but if you think I got

twenty grand to toss around like it was a sack of nuts, you got hair *in* your head as well as on it. Anyhow, where do you think *I* can raise all that money?"

"You could borrow it from Snead, maybe?" Edgar suggested. "The old miser's got ten times that much hidden away in this house."

"An' what would I give him for an I.O.U.? My right arm?"

"Well, you could—" Edgar coughed delicately—"I thought you might be able to borrow the money like I borrowed it from the bank—"

"An' join you in spookland when I cash in my chips? No, thanks! Squaredeal Sam McGhee's conscience is clear as restaurant soup, an' he means to keep it that way."

"Well, you don't have to be so snide about it," said Edgar sulkily. "It was just a suggestion. And, after all, he *owes* me the money . . . in a way. It was tightwads like him that got rich off people like me during the war."

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

Edgar explained. He explained in some detail, an' with considerable vehemence, considerin' the facts. But what he said give me a start, an' then set me to cogitatin'.

When he had finished explainin' I done a rightabout face on my original decision.

"See here, chum," I said, "maybe me an' you *can* do business, after all. Suppose I clear up this debt of yours . . . will you do me a favor in return?"

"Anything you say, old pal," swore Edgar earnestly. "Just name it, old pal, old pal."

"I will when I get back," I told him, "—which should be not long from now. Just sit tight an' wait for me. I got an idea you'll be out of the shroud by dawning."

So I left him. I went downtown an' got the twenty thousand dollars, slipped it in an envelope an' mailed it to the

bank, then hurried home again, burnin' with eagerness. But I got damped off quick an' complete. Because when I got to my room, Edgar was gone. He'd vanished like a gob's pay on shore leave. An' I ain't never seen him since."

Sam sighed and relapsed into a brooding silence. I waited patiently for a moment, then prodded him.

"Well, Sam?"

He shrugged ruefully. "Well . . . that's all. Where I made my mistake was in not claimin' my favor in advance. The way I figger it, Edgar didn't sneak out on me. He was a victim of circumstances. Bein' an honorable spook like he was, he would have *liked* to stick around, but the instant his crime was atoned he stopped bein' earthbound. He's probably strummin' a harp right now. Or if not that, at any rate he's warm enough in his new home."

Sam glanced at me thoughtfully. "So now you see my reason for comin' here to see you. It's not as if I was askin' you to *give* me the money. All I want is a loan on an investment that can't miss—"

"You mean," I exclaimed, "you expect me to lend you *twenty thousand dollars!* Are you crazy?"

"Hell, no!" snorted Sam. "Are you? Did I say anything about twenty gees? All I want is the temporary loan of a five spot so I can trot down to a good spiritualist an' call Edgar on the Ouija board. He still owes me a return favor . . . an' I want to know how that trick double-entry bookkeeping he dreamed up works. I already got myself lined up for a job as junior clerk at the First National Bank, beginnin' next week. An' bein' conscientious like I am, I wouldn't want to work for a new employer without knowin' the fine points of the rack . . . I mean, the business."

"But the twenty grand you sent Edgar's bank?" I expos-

tulated. "How are you going to repay that? And where did you get it? You said that you were broke when you hit New York."

"*Almost* broke," corrected Sam. "I still had one or two bucks in my pocket. Enough to buy a barrelful or two of what it took to pay off Edgar's debt of honor.

"I told you he'd been dead a long time. An' I told you it was wartime inflation that turned him into a criminal. What I maybe forgot to mention is that he lived an' done his thievin' durin' the Civil War. The minute I learned that, I seen the way to pay off his debt for him. I sent the Bank of Richmond as full restitution . . . twenty thousand dollars in Confederate money!"

THE CUNNING OF THE BEAST

He will look upon
Our crouching shame, may make us stand upright
Burning in terror O that it were night!

THERE has been much disagreeable comment on the case of our late brother, the Yawa Eloem, and we number amongst us many who feel that the punishment meted out to him, severe as it was, still did not exact complete retribution for the evil he loosed in our midst.

It is with these vengeful ones I should like to take issue.

Now, let it not be thought that I view with approval the experiments of the learned and unhappy Doctor Eloem. The reverse is true; being one of his oldest friends and earliest confidants, I was perhaps the first to warn him against doing that which he did. This warning I delivered on the night the Yawa conceived his staggering ambition.

But to those who contend that his intention was to overthrow our great civilization, destroy our culture and turn the rulership of our beloved homeland into the hands of barbarian monstrosities, I feel I should present the true facts.

Doctor Eloem is more to be pitied than scorned. His was the sad fate of one who, delving into secrets better left unlearned, succeeded only in creating a monster mightier than its maker . . .

Well I remember the night the Yawa's dream was born. It was the Night of Utter Black which occurs but once in

each twelve revolutions of Kios. Both suns were set, and all nine moons were vanished from the sky. No doubt the burning stars shone true in the encircling jet vault of space, but from our Refuge they could not be seen. Great clouds hung thickly to our shielding Dome; against its transparent hemisphere torrents of corrosive rain lashed in unending fury.

Though our shelters were warmed and kept dry for just such times as these, my body creaked and groaned when I tried to move; one limb was so stiffened in its socket that I could scarcely will it to function. Eloem was in better condition, having but recently completed a rehabilitation at the Clinic, but the condensation affected his vision, and time and again as we huddled there in misery he wiped the moisture from his visor.

Dimly we heard the thud of running feet, and peering fearfully into the mists we saw our friend Nesro, who had been caught in the deadly storm and was belatedly racing to shelter. But even before we could call him to our Dome he fell prey to the cursed climate. His footsteps faltered; his joints locked; he stumbled and fell headlong.

A horror gripped us. For a Kiosian to lie for more than minutes on that drenched ground meant certain ending. But we were helpless. To attempt a rescue without shedders would only put us in the same plight.

Eloem lurched to his feet, and what he cried should convince his enemies that, whatever else his faults, he was no coward.

"Courage, Nesro," he cried. "We are coming."

But in answer to his words came a cry from the fallen Nesro.

"No, comrades! It is better *one* should end than many." His voice was feeble. "Open the Refuge. I shall try to make it without my carrier."

We screamed in unison then, "No, Nesro . . . no! You can't possibly make it! The pelting death—"

But our pleas were vain. Desperately Nesro scurried from the rain-glistening cover of his carrier, flashed toward us flaming like a pillar of crimson in the darkness. For an instant it seemed his madness might be crowned with success . . . but only for an instant. Then the raw and dreadful poison of the rain seeped through his feeble shield. A high, thin scream of pain rent our nerves, and where Nesro had been, briefly there blossomed in the night a white incandescence unbearable to look at. Then . . . nothing.

So ended Nesro. I was moved, but my emotion was as naught compared to that of my friend, the learned Yawa Eloem. He moaned, and there in our tiny Refuge cursed aloud, speaking Names which I dare not repeat.

"Now, woe and despair," he cried terribly, "upon the mocking gods who made us the weaklings we are! For we are at once masters of a world and cringing servants to that world's every element. What matter that our intellect has built for us an empire, or that with wit and wisdom we have plumbed the secrets of a universe? Our minds are living glories, but we hobble about our kingdom like cripples, poorest of all we hold in fee. Even those wild, breathing beasts who grub for worms beneath the stones dare face the forces which strike us low. Even such miserable clods as *that*—"

And he pointed a shaking hand toward the rain-soaked carrier abandoned by Nesro. It lay face down in a wind-lashed rivulet, motionless, rusting, ruined beyond repair. As we watched, there scampered from the woods a small air-breather. The furry creature sniffed hopefully about the carrier. Then, scenting nothing wherewith to sate its revolting appetite, it shuffled off, rain dripping from its pelt.

I shuddered and asked reasonably, "But surely, Eloem, you would not barter your soul for the brute body of such a beast? True, the gods have ordained that we must pay a price for our mastery. We lack the physical stamina of those lower animals. But is not our superior intellect compensation enough?

"And as for form and substance, we have made great progress. Our forefathers knew not how to build themselves tangible bodies. Today we encase ourselves in cleverly wrought metal carriers which perform all physical functions for us."

"Bah!" spat the Yawa savagely. "Carriers which but accentuate our impotence. We garb ourselves in shells of forged metal, and fancy we have gained mobility. But is this true? No! We have succeeded only in making ourselves slaves to the bodies we have wrought—" He laughed hollowly, mocking the chatter of the Clinic specialists—"Grease here . . . grease there . . . a drop of oil in the knee-joint. Replace lens . . . replace digits . . . repair rusted plate in frontal lobe—"

"Still," I protested, "our metal bodies *do* enable us to get about more easily, perform tasks otherwise impossible."

"And under what handicap?" he thundered. "In cold weather we shiver and tremble in our metal homes; in hot, our yielding rivets warp and melt. In dry weather our joints lock with grating sand. In wet—" He paused and stared bitterly at the empty carrier of Nesro—"we perish."

I said resignedly, "What you say is true. But there is nothing to be done about it. I, for one, am content—"

"But *I* am not! There must be *some* way of living other than huddling pitifully caged in a metal carcase. There must be *some* other form of servant—"

He stopped abruptly, and I stared at him curiously.

"Yes?"

"Servant," he repeated. "Yes, that's it! Another kind of servant. One which does not melt in the heat and freeze in the cold, shrivel in drouth and rot in the rain. A servant by Nature adapted to combat Nature's terrors. *That* is what our race needs; what we must have . . . *will* have!"

"But where will you find such a servant?"

The Yawa Eloem pointed a creaking arm to the mist-shrouded forest. "Out there, my brother."

"In the forest? You mean—?"

"Yes. The creatures of flesh. The air-breathers."

I laughed. Despite my pain and misery, I laughed. It was just too ridiculous, the concept of training those tiny furry beasts to perform for us our manual tasks.

"Oh, come now, Eloem, you can't be serious. Those miserable, dwarfed weaklings?"

"Bear within them," he said slowly, shrewdly, "the seed of animate life. That is all that matters, my friend. The germ of life. Their size, their form . . . such things are unimportant. These I will mold to meet our requirements. I will raise them from all fours, refashion their brute brains to give them intellect. Yes, even this I, the Yawa Eloem, shall do. And I so pledge unto the gods."

A strange uneasiness filled me, I knew not quite why. I said thoughtfully, "Have a care, O Yawa, lest these same gods take offense at your intent. I am no carping sophist, but it seems to me there are certain limits beyond which one may not go without too greatly daring. The altering of form, the giving of wisdom, these are feats which only the gods may accomplish with impunity. It is not for ones like thee and me—"

But I fear the Yawa did not hear my words. Too intent

was he on the vision that had come to him. There in the wet and the darkness beside me he stirred, and his voice was rapt and strident with a dream.

"Yes, this shall I do," he proclaimed. "I shall build a new race, a race of servants obedient to us, their masters."

Many time-periods passed ere next I saw the Yawa Eloem. We of Kios are a recluse race, separate by nature and individual in our working habits, and I was busy with duties of my own. The Grand Council had commissioned me to perfect a form of craft wherein our colonists might hurtle the darkness of space to the yet unconquered planets of our double sun. With this tremendous labor was I occupied.

So the moons waxed and waned. Thrice changed the seasons, warm and cold, and wet and dry and wet again. And in the privacy of his own domed laboratory the Yawa Eloem pursued his secret labors in solitude.

And then one double twilight, when the crimson rays of the smaller sun sinking in the north merged weird shadows with the pale green luminescence of the greater sun's southern setting, there came to me in my workshop the Yawa.

Excitement was strong within him, and he cried without preface of formal greeting, "My friend, would you behold a marvel to strike awe into the boldest heart?"

"Why, who would not?" I laughed.

"Then come!" cried the Yawa intently. "Then come with me and wonder and behold!"

And he led the way to his own Dome . . .

Let me say that never dwelt a scientist amidst such great refinement as that with which Eloem had surrounded himself. His Dome comprised no *single* chamber, as is the case

with most of us; his was a mighty structure subdivided into numerous rooms and niches, each dedicated to its own purpose.

Once we passed through a chemical laboratory, its shelf-lined walls aglisten with innumerable rows of vials and beakers; again we crossed a library whose musty tomes spanned the whole range of living knowledge; elsewhere sprawled chambers filled with electrical apparatus, surgical equipment and curious machines of which I could not even guess the purpose. I recall traversing a steaming room wherein was sunk a hydroponic tank whence emanated an oddly noisome scent. I cannot speak with surety of what this tank contained, but I do recall that as we passed, from its oily depths there flopped a strange, amorphous something which scrabbled with nailless paws at the walls of its prison and bubbled piteous plaints in a voice of tongueless horror.

But past all these, his chambers of experiment, the Yawa led me swiftly until we came at last to the furthermost door. Before this he paused for an instant dramatically. And then:

"Here," he proclaimed, "is my final testing chamber. Here the fulfillment of my great invention."

He flung open the door and bade me enter.

Well might the Yawa glory in what he here had wrought. For frankly do I confess that my eyes, following the motion of his hand, widened in astonishment at what they beheld.

This was no mere room. It was a vast Dome-covered acreage, formed to the semblance of a veritable living forest. Nay, more than forest; say rather a garden spot, a paradise. For its growth was as various as any wrought by Nature. Yet with such thought had the Yawa Eloem conceived and carried out its purpose that here he had brought

into being a landscape more beautiful than ever was sown by Nature's heedless hand.

Here a high grove cast towering green spires upward; there, through mossy banks bedecked with fragrant flowers, purled a tiny crystal brooklet; elsewhere, rimmed by lush meadows, sprawled lazy hills and flatlands ripe with grain. Small beasts stirred in the forests, their restless murmurings a balm to weary spirits; fish flashed and rippled in the eddies of the stream; and from some distant grove came the thrilling cadence of birdsong raised in joy.

I stared at Eloem, stunned with wonderment. "It is," I cried aloud, "it is indeed a miracle you have created here, wise Yawa! What beauty and what charm! The Grand Council will be astonished."

"You think so?" he asked, pleased at my praise. "You really think so?"

"How could they be otherwise? By the gods, Eloem, would that the whole of our planet were as delightful as this small niche you have created beneath your laboratory Dome. What joy would be ours, what wonderful existence, if all Kios were such a garden spot as this; a shielded wonderland wherein we might dwell without fear of the natural terrors which beset us . . . heat and cold, drouth and murderous rainfall.

"You said you would awe me, my friend. You have succeeded beyond your wildest imaginings. I humble myself before a master artist who has created perfection."

"But," said the Yawa, "you have not seen all."

"There is *more* to see?"

"Much more. Not yet have you seen the greatest of my accomplishments. Come."

And he led the way down a tiny path curving through the wilderness. As we neared a grove deep-nestled in the

rolling hills he called in gentle tones, "My son! My son! Where art thou, child of my making?"

And before I could question this strange salutation a movement broke the silence of the glade. Branches parted, and from a leafy bower stepped a vision which stunned and left me speechless.

It was a living creature, an animal of flesh and blood, an air-breather walking upright on its two hind limbs. Truly had Eloem boasted he would mold a creation in his own image. So closely did its shape resemble that of the carriers which we of Kios build for our own usage that for an instant I believed it a gigantic hoax. I thought Eloem to amuse me had coated the carrier of a friend or assistant with pigment.

Then I saw this monster's body was not forged of sturdy metals like our own, but was soft, pulsating, resilient. The curious dark growth of fur which covered its head, its breast and its limbs grew naturally, it seemed, from its very flesh. It breathed with great gulping motions of the chest, and its wide, natural optics were not sensitive visors such as those through which *we* see, but were the natural eyes of animals.

These now shifted from one to the other of us in mute appraisal as the sensate beast asked, "Yes, my lord? You called me?"

Eloem, his voice benevolent and warm as that of a parent asked, "Where hast thou been, my son?"

The creature replied quietly, "I wandered through the fields, my nostrils savoring the fragrance of the flowers. I walked amongst the trees and touched them, marveling at their strong, rough firmness. Beside the brook I knelt and drank of its waters. I tasted the berries of the vines and the

fruit of the trees, and gave thanks unto thee, O my lord, who brought these things into being and myself unto this paradise."

"And art thou happy, my son?"

"Happy?" The beast's blank stare questioned the very meaning of the word.

"Lack you anything for which your heart hungers?"

"Nay, nothing, lord. Save perhaps—"

The Yawa's creation hesitated. His voice stopped, his eyes fell, as if he were abashed at his own temerity in questioning the perfection of this garden.

Eloem demanded, "Then there *is* something, my child?"

"There is . . . one small thing, my lord. It is scarce worth mentioning, but—" The creature shuffled in embarrassment—"I am lonely, O Yawa. I walk at evening in the cool of the garden, seeing about me the bright colored birds, the rustling insects and the beasts of the fields, and lo! for each of these there is one to be companion. Only I, of all the creatures who inhabit this paradise, am mateless."

"But—" frowned Eloem.

"I question not thy bounty, O great Yawa," said the creature hastily. "In thy infinite wisdom thou knowest best what shall be given thy servant. Still—"

He faltered to silence, head bowed servilely before the pondering Yawa. But I could not help noticing that his glance darted swiftly up from beneath shyly lowered lashes.

I said, with a touch of pique I am afraid, "This is a strange being you have created, Eloem. Though he dwells in paradise, still he dares question the perfection thereof."

But Eloem said gently, slowly, "Nevertheless, there is

wisdom in what he suggests. It was much effort to create this being. It were folly to attempt the creation of scores, hundreds, thousands of others like him in my laboratory. Perhaps in his innocent demanding he has offered the proper solution to this problem. A mate? But yes, of course! I need but create for him a mate and then—in the fullness of time—he and she shall produce for Kios the race of servants for which they were conceived.

"Very well, my son." He turned again to the waiting creature. "It shall be as you ask. On the morrow come to the room where first thou wakened. There, out of thy substance and my wisdom, shall I create a second like thyself, but of another sex. And now . . . farewell."

So left I Eloem's garden. But this time I did not allow so long a time to pass ere my returning. My curiosity was stirred, not only as to how the Yawa's magnificent experiment would turn out, but also as to what form of creature he would create to be his beast's companion. Moreover, when it was bruited about that I, alone of all Kios, had been invited to visit Eloem's laboratory, great interest was aroused and I was summoned before the Grand Council, there to report on that which I had seen.

In glowing terms I told them of the wonders he had wrought, and greatly did they marvel. Great Kron, who heads our Council, mused, "Intelligent life in fleshly form? But, yes! That *is* the answer to our problem. The Yawa Eloem is a sage spirit, and mighty is this thing he seeks to accomplish."

Another cried rapturously, "Now dawns the long-dreamed liberation of our race! When this new herd of servants has been bred, then will we of Kios be free to rid ourselves once and for all of the metal carriers in which we house ourselves. Secure beneath great Domes we may rest

ourselves in easeful pursuit of pleasure and knowledge while our servants, not sensitive as we to climatic conditions, carry out our instructions."

But still another, older than the rest, spoke dubiously.

"I do not know," he said. "This is, in truth, a mighty thing the Yawa has attempted. Perhaps it is *too* mighty. The gods in their omnipotence frown upon our seeking to delve too deeply into certain mysteries. And methinks already Eloem has tampered with a secret and occult lore . . . the creation of living souls."

"Souls?" laughed one of our younger councilors. "But how can there be souls in bestial bodies?"

"Where life alone exists, perhaps the soul is absent. But our brother has told us that this creature of Eloem's not only moves and obeys, but voices his own thoughts. That bespeaks intelligence. And where exists intelligence may also be a soul. If this be true—"

The speaker shook his head gravely. But the rest of us laughed. As we all knew, old Saddryn was ever a pessimist and a crier-of-woe.

Yet Kron in his infinite wisdom took heed of even this gloomy warning, and bade me continue my visits to Eloem's laboratory that I might keep the Council informed as to the progress of the experiment.

Thus it was that some short time later once again I strolled with the Yawa through his delightful garden.

As we neared the glade wherein it was the creature's custom to lurk, I sensed a subtle change. What it was I could not at first detect, whether of sight or sound or simply atmosphere. Then suddenly and with a sense of resharpened curiosity I realized what was different. When first I had strode this pathway, a part of its beauty had been in its fresh, untrammeled wildness of growth . . .

the helter-skelter confusion of vines and trees and bushes, the lavish abundance with which bright flowers sprang from unexpected places, the haphazard delight of natural beauties seen amidst natural surroundings.

But now all that was changed. The pathway upon which we walked no longer twisted aimlessly beneath arboreal bowers. It had been carefully scraped and straightened; the rank brush flanking it had been trimmed to a semblance of order; the low and overhanging boughs had been cut back to allow the wanderer headroom. Beauty was still present, but no longer was it the clean, unspoiled improvisation of Nature; it was a neat and regimented orthodoxy, pleasing to the eye but somehow strangely stifling to the senses.

I commented on this to Eloem, and he smiled quietly.

"That," he said, "is the doing of the She. An orderly creature, that one!" And he shook his head with almost reluctant admiration.

"*Her* doing? Then you have finished her?"

"Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I finished two of them. The first one dwelt here with him for a while, but I had to—" He sighed—"remove her. She was too much like the He. Carefree, adventurous, enamored of gay wanderings and pleasant sloth, rather than earnestly intent upon her duties. They were more companions than mates. They laughed and played together throughout the livelong day and accomplished nothing. So I was forced to create another She, one with instincts and desires unlike his own."

"But I should think," I demurred, "this would not be to his liking? After all, a companion is what he asked for."

The Yawa chuckled.

"What he *asked* for, but not what he really wanted. You should study psychology, my friend, to realize that in nature, even as in the electrical art, it is opposites which

attract. This second She is so unlike him that he is drawn to her as by a magnet. She baffles and confuses him . . . and brings him running. She commands and he obeys; she demands and he fulfills. With a motion of a finger she exacts from him the most arduous labor. She is a bother to him, I fear, and a source of vexing trouble . . . but for her rare words of praise he has done more actual work than ever since I placed him in this garden."

"Then," I said, comprehending, "you followed the example of the insect? Made her larger than him, and stronger, that she might enforce her demands?"

"On the contrary," denied Eloem, "I made her . . . But see for yourself." And he called, "My children!"

The bower parted, and into its opening strode his twain creatures.

In a glance I saw it was as he said. The male beast was oddly changed. There was a new assurance in his features, a confidence which might have been born of his newfound capabilities. But there was at the same time a . . . a something else I could not quite decipher. It was a reserve, a furtiveness which had not been present when first I saw him. But more than this first glance I saw not, for my attention was drawn and riveted to the creature's new companion. And strange as it may seem, coming from one uncorporeal as myself, I must confess that even *I* was fascinated by this, the Yawa Eloem's latest creation.

For he had combined in her not only the sturdiness and the nobility of the male, but something subtler still; a grace, a charm, a winsomeness and allurement far out of proportion to the small physique with which he had endowed her.

Shorter by half a head was she than her mate, slighter of bone and more fragile, whiter of skin. One could tell at

a glance that hers was strength not built of sinew but of purpose. She bore herself lightly, walking on the balls of her feet with lissom grace, and she seemed all sweet docility. Yet, curiously, she spoke for both.

"You called, my lord?" she asked. "What would you of us?"

"Naught," said the Yawa Eloem. "I wished but to see you, show you to my friend. You are happy here, my children?"

"Yes, my lord," said the She. "Of course, there are a few things—"

"Yes?" asked Eloem.

The male spoke querulously.

"She wants the streambed widened that we may swim therein. She thinks, too, that I should transplant berry bushes nearer to our glade that we need not hunt so far for provender. And we have talked—" He cast a dubious glance at his mate—"that is, *she* has talked much of our building some sort of dwelling."

"She?" laughed Eloem. "Always she? What is *your* desire in these matters, my firstmade?"

"Well—" said the male hesitantly.

"I have pointed out to him," interrupted the She in sweet and lilting tones, "that only by doing these things can we prove to the lesser beasts that we are their superiors and their rightful masters. It is true, my lord, is it not, that we *are* their masters?"

I asked impatiently, "Since when do beasts rule beasts?" but the Yawa silenced me with a gesture.

"There is logic to that. It is right and proper that one animal should exercise dominion over its inferiors. If your mate wants these things, I see no harm in your providing them for her."

"Oh, very well," said the male petulantly. "But it is

wearisome work, which I like not. When the *other* She was here we roamed where we would for berries, swam at chance when we found a widening of the stream; we laughed and played and found no need of stifling shelter."

"Like," laughed the secondmade gayly and, I thought, perhaps a bit tauntingly, "like two happy and carefree children. All day they played, then in the dark of night they curled apart, each to his own soft nest of ferns, and slumbered in cool companionship. Of course " And she laughed again, flexing her muscles smoothly, languorously; until that moment I had not realized how strong was the animal within her—"Of course, if *that* is what you want, the master can no doubt bring back the other She—"

But a swift light, warm and hungry, brightened in the male's eyes, and he shook his head.

"No," he decided, "I shall do as she asks, my lord."

"Very well," said Eloem. "It is your decision to make. And now farewell, my children. We must go."

But even as we turned the She addressed us, humble as ever and sweetly supplicating, but with a cunning determination nonetheless.

"Master—"

"Yes, my daughter?"

"There is another thing . . . another trifling thing. We are humble creatures, ignorant and unworthy of your attentions. We would not trouble you for counsel and advice on every tiny thing we wish to do. Is it not possible that when need arises we may be allowed to enter into the chamber wherein are stored the books of knowledge and learning? If we could but do this, we need not waste time and effort learning to do things wrongly, but may build and create in proper fashion."

"No!" said the Yawa Eloem. "No, my daughter, that is one thing you may *not* do. All this wide garden is open

unto you; its hills and valleys, glades and rivulets. But there is one door through which you may not pass: that which leads to my private laboratory. This is the Law, and the only Law I have laid down unto you."

"But—" pouted the She enticingly.

"Let us speak of it no more," cried Eloem sternly. "You have heard my word. And now, goodbye."

So left we them standing there, he shrugging and resigned, she with head lowered. Yet as we left I felt her eyes upon us, shrewd and bold beneath their lowered lashes.

You may wonder, my brothers, why waste I so much wordage on the telling of this. Believe me, it is but to demonstrate that *never* did the Yawa Eloem—as has been accused by his detractors—conspire against our own race for the overthrow of our empire. Who says so speaks untruth. The Yawa came near to bringing disaster upon us, true; but only because, being the soul of righteousness himself, he could not comprehend the cunning of the beasts he had created . . .

From this point on you are familiar with the facts of the case. You know how on the Night of the Four Moons it was strangely noted that the laboratory Dome of Eloem glowed with the reflection of a ruddy flame throughout the evening. It is unfortunate that no investigation was made of this at the time, but it is understandable. We of Kios are a recluse race, self-sufficient and solitary by nature. None knew that the Yawa was not in his laboratory, but was traveling afar in search of new equipment with which to stock his depleted stores.

All those of us, including myself, who maintain residence within sight of our brother's laboratory remember well the subsequent series of incidents emanating from

that spot. Once the sound of explosion. Still another time the clamorous pounding of metal upon metal as if a dozen of us, carrier-clad, vied in games of strength.

But none knew or guessed the import of these sights and sounds.

Knowledge of dawning peril came to us only when one morn we wakened to discover the Dome of our neighbor Lato smashed and in smoldering ruins. When startled friends braved the wreckage to learn Lato's fate they were grieved to find Lato's carrier lying amidst the wreckage. When the headpiece was forced open it was found that Lato himself was ended. His volatile energy had been expended in a single gigantic burst of flame which fused the metal wherein he had maintained residence.

Even after this disaster no suspicion attached to Eloem's labors. And certainly none dreamed that his creations were in any way responsible. Not even when a few nights later the nearby Dome of the councilor Palimon was found to be rudely split and flooded with poisonous oxide of hydrogen was it guessed that the animals could be responsible for such a brutal attack upon their overlords.

Palimon was, of course, ended. His spirit seared and shriveled by the lethal liquid, he could tell us nothing. What dreadful tale of agony he might have related is better left unguessed.

And then, at fearful last, came revelation as to the cause of these disasters. This occasion was, as you will remember, the destruction of the Dome of the Grand Council itself. Like the other events, it occurred in the dark of night when no Kiosian dares venture forth, and horrible was its accomplishment.

First came, as had before, a violent explosion. Then in its wake rose a fearful sea of flame, sweeping the council-hall and slaying all who dwelt beneath the Dome. And

when blistering fire had gutted the ruined hemisphere, then came the dank night wind, bearing with it lethal rains to destroy such life as might remain within the halls.

It is by sheer chance that on this night scarce half the Council was foregathered, else might a blow have been struck from which our empire might never have recovered. But as it was, great Kron and half his Council had been in my Dome inspecting my new and nearly complete spacecraft. Shedder-garbed against the night mists they were returning to their dwelling when the explosion trembled the ground beneath their feet. As they spurred their carriers to top speed, they—or I should say we, for I was with them—reached the scene in time to see outlined against the flickering flames two bodies. These, like our own, were carrier-clad, and at the sight of them Kron burst forth with a terrible cry.

"Traitors!" he roared. "Two of our own people . . . traitors! Now the gods forfend that I should live to see this awful day! Then the other explosions were *not* accidents; they were deliberate murder! Woe upon Kios that has spawned such vermin—"

Then I stopped him with a shrill, excited cry. For upon sight of us the two marauders had turned and raced away. And though the taller of these could not be told from one of our own brethren, by the pace and motion of the other —an awkward, gliding run—I recognized and knew the nature of our enemy.

"Nay, these are no children of Kios, O Kron," I cried, "but the beasts . . . the beasts of the Yawa Eloem, turned like serpents against their masters!"

Great Kron cried loud in his thunderous rage, then turned he to the royal messenger. "Gavril," he ordered, "sound now your trumpet over all the land. Bid Eloem here instantly. Mikel, arouse your troops!"

And then I knew the fury of great Kron, for not in a score of centuries had the gleaming troops of Mikel been ordered into action. But without a word the commander of our armed forces turned and sped toward the armory wherein are carefully stored against the hour of need those dreadful weapons which our race holds ever in reserve.

What happened next you know. The Yawa, being summoned, came immediately. Nor waited he even upon the slow movements of his mechanical carrier. Risking the night mists and the dark, with the speed of light he flashed from the other end of the land in his natural form. We saw him approach from afar, a pillar of flame in the darkness.

When he learned what had befallen, a cry of pain and anguish broke from him. Like a patient parent he might have denied the evil intent of his children were not the proof of their mischief a smoldering wreckage before him.

Then said Kron, "Now great is the evil your creations have wrought, O Yawa. But greater still shall be their punishment. For even now our warriors sweep forth to destroy them."

But the Yawa pleaded, "Wait, O Kron! Stay your hand till I have learned what lust inspired this evil. Let me go to my children and learn from their lips the reason for this deed."

And Kron nodded.

"So be it. But be swift."

Eloem turned to me beseechingly.

"You, my friend? Will you come with me?"

So, for the last time, together went we two into the paradise which the Yawa had created beneath his Dome. With-

in, the paths were cool, the grottoes shadowed, and the soft brook purled through mossy silences. No songbird sang, but from the thicket came the soft and lazy cadences of restless insects. Together but alone, unspeaking, we trod the paths marked out by the He and She. And as we neared the glade wherein it was the creatures' wont to dwell, the Yawa Eloem raised his voice in stern command . . . but in sadness, too, I thought.

It is perhaps meaningful that in this hour of sorrow he should have called only to the first of his creations.

"My son!" he called. "My son! Where art thou, O child of mine own making?"

There came no answer but the rippling of the breeze through the boughs, the rustling of a frightened thing in the high grass.

"My son," cried Eloem again. "Where art thou? Know you not the voice of your lord and maker?"

Then suddenly, a dim whiteness in the shadows, rose the crouching figure of the He from the brush before us. And I saw with sick horror that he was not, as ever before, clad only in his own fleshly raiment, but that his body was shielded within the greaved and bucklered harness of a carrier such as we ourselves wear.

He spoke, and his voice was meek.

"You called, my lord?"

The Yawa's voice was stricken.

"My son, my son!" he grieved. "And wherefore hast thou donned this raiment?"

The male's voice was a thick mumbling in the darkness. He spoke in half apology, half defiance.

"It was the She, my lord. She told me I was naked and a weakling, and I was ashamed. Together we built these garments that we might be strong and mighty."

"Built?" repeated Eloem. "Built those garments? But

where, O creature of little knowledge, learned you the secret of such things?" Then in a tone of sudden understanding, "You learned this not in the garden, my son, but . . . elsewhere."

The beast shuffled miserably. "It was the She, my lord," he whined. "It was the She who—"

Then cried the Yawa in a terrible voice, "Let the She stand forth!"

And suddenly she was there, rising from the thicket beside her mate. She too was garbed in a metal carrier, but her headpiece was removed, and never thought I to see such boldness in the eyes of a creature bred to serfdom. On her features was scorn; on her lips pride, anger, and rebellion.

She cried defiantly, "Yea, even I, my lord. It was I who showed the He how to build the garments. I, too, who read the books and learned the secret of making the flame which explodes, the fire that destroys, of smashing the Masters' Domes, that the night-waters might seep in and end them."

"These things," said the Yawa in awful tones, "you could learn in but one place. In my library, which was forbidden to you. But how entered you there? The door was locked and bolted."

The male creature shifted nervously.

"There was a grill in the door, O Master," he explained. "Through this the She sent our friend the serpent with instructions to unlock the portal to us."

The Yawa trembled with an awesome rage, and his voice was like the rolling of great thunders.

"Now cursed be you!" he cried. "For you have defied my commands, and in opening the forbidden gate tasted the fruits of evil knowledge I forbade you! And cursed be the serpent who aided your rebellion. May he be eyed

with endless loathing by all who spring from your loins in countless generations to come! For surely I say unto you, never shall it be forgotten what you have this night done . . . neither by yourselves, nor by your children, nor by your children's children's children unto the end of time.

"Here—" And his voice broke with the intensity of his passion—"here did I build for you a garden of wondrous beauty, a paradise wherein was all for which your hearts might hunger. But it was not enough. You would escape its walls and set yourselves up as masters even over those who created you. Henceforth I rid my heart of you. You are a broken reed, an experiment which failed. I disclaim myself of you and your beast-born ambitions.

"Mikel!" And he called to the warrior captain who now, with gleaming sword held high, had appeared at the gate of the garden. "Do what you must, Mikel!"

But Mikel said quietly and with a great sorrow, "My orders have been changed, O brother Eloem."

"Changed?"

"Yes. Kron has decided that mere ending is not a fitting punishment for that which these creatures have done."

"But," I gasped, "if not ending, then what—?"

It was Kron himself who answered.

"According to our laws, O Yawa Eloem, it is forbidden that any living creature with a soul be brought by our hands to mortal ending. And in council sage have we decided that by their very rebellion have these creatures proven the existence of their souls.

"Yet since we must rid ourselves of their evil presence, there is one solution. They shall be placed in the space-craft recently completed by our friend here, and transported across the everlasting darkness of space to such bourne as may be farthest removed from our own planet.

Where this journey may end I cannot say nor guess, but somewhere may be another planet where you and your ill-spawned experiments can exist beyond our ken and finding until the gods, in the fullness of their mercy, see fit to rule otherwise."

The Yawa Eloem whispered shakily, "Not only they, but . . . myself?"

And said great Kron sadly, "Even so. For was it not you, O Yawa, who brought them into being?"

Thus ended the matter of the Yawa Eloem and those beasts which, in the great folly of his wisdom, he undertook to remold as fleshly servants in the image of himself. It is a sad and disheartening tale, and one I would not tell save that some critics have seen fit to cast aspersions upon the truly noble character of our exiled brother.

Thus ended, too—so far as our knowledge extends—the existence of the Yawa and his creations. As had been commanded, they were placed within my spacecraft, therein forever banished from fair Kios. Where, when and how their journey ended, or if ever, I know not. Perhaps they wander still, their craft a tiny mote in the vastness of all-swaddling space. Perhaps somewhere they met cruel ending in the flaming heart of a star. Perhaps—and this I hope—they found somewhere a planet, and upon it made a new home.

However this may be, I cannot say. But this I know: those do great wrong who criticize the Yawa Eloem, naming him fiend and traitor. Never lived a nobler soul, nor one with greater ambition for the welfare of his own race. That he sinned is undeniable, but his sin was only that of tampering with forces too great for him. For as all know, there are limits beyond which one is forbidden to probe.

And they who seek to know, with the gods, the secret of the creation of life are ever doomed to failure.

It was a wondrous dream the Yawa Eloem dreamed. But there was one thing he failed to take into consideration: the animal nature of those he tried to endow with intelligence. Never, never—though they raised themselves from all fours to walk like beings—could they slough off those animal instincts. It was that which the Yawa could not foresee, and that which caused his downfall.

So . . . they are gone, the Yawa Eloem and they whom he created: the male to whom he gave the name Adam and the she who was called Eve. Yet mourn I my exiled brother, and ever is my soul sick within me when I think on that which overthrew him—

—On the cunning . . . the dreadful, dreadful cunning of the beasts . . .

III

The Five Lives of Robert Jordan

THE FIVE LIVES OF ROBERT JORDAN

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

AT THE moment he laid eyes upon the watch, Robert Jordan experienced a strange and most disquieting sensation: that of having somewhere, sometime, seen it before.

—Which was, of course, a whimsical conceit, because the timepiece lay in the window of a dingy antique shop on a back street he had never previously explored. It was an odd watch, odd and very beautiful. Challengingly beautiful. It not only invited but compelled closer inspection.

Mr. Jordan hesitated briefly, then opened the door and stepped into the shop . . .

The merchant was a lean and faded man, age-mellowed as the wares in which he dealt. He made no motion forward as the doorbell tinkled, but remained behind his counter deftly disposing on an inlaid board the most exquisite set of chessmen Robert Jordan had ever seen.

The set was French and old . . . how old would tax the judgment of an expert. Jordan stared in mute admiration as the merchant adjusted ivory warriors less fragile than the fingers that caressed them. The pieces were no mere conventionalized carvings. They had depth and warmth and meaning. The pawns, staunch pikemen, crouched bent-kneed as to repulse the onslaught of a hated foe. Flanked by impetuous consorts, the two embattled

kings, immobile and austere, glowered defiance across the chequered battlefield. Instead of mitered bishops, pied jesters, doubled with mirthless laughter, peered slyly up over their shoulders at mounted knights who, lances atilt, stood watch before gay-pennoned citadels.

The merchant's voice was soft and gray with sorrow.

"They were wise, those ancient craftsmen," he said. "Very wise. They sent their kings to battle advised by fools . . . not heartened by creatures of oblique piety." His fingers touched a mocking jester's cap, and for an instant the hushed air trembled with the far and muted tinkling of a myriad tiny bells. Then, "You would like to help me arrange the pieces?" he asked.

Robert Jordan shook his head. It was nonsensical, of course, but he had a sudden, horrible feeling that were he to touch one of those chessmen he would feel it warm and quicken into life beneath his fingers.

"No!" he said a shade too loudly. Then, embarrassed by the query in the merchant's eyes, "No, thank you. Looks ugly. I . . . There's something else. That watch in the window—"

"Ah, yes. The watch." The merchant nodded, glided away. A moment later, gold-gleaming against black velvet, it lay on the counter before Mr. Jordan.

It was a strange watch. Scarcely a desirable watch by modern, utilitarian standards. It was thick and heavy and awkwardly hinged at the base; against its time-faded dial the tarnished numerals were barely discernible. Of course it was a key-winder. The key was secured to the set-stem by a small chain. The hands were cumbersome, the case worn. It was not at all a practical timepiece.

But there was something about it . . .

"It runs?" asked Mr. Jordan.

The merchant raised the watch to Mr. Jordan's ear. Its

soft ticking counted the dwindling sands of eternity. It did not now tell the correct hour, but that was a matter of mere adjustment. The watch ran.

"It's . . . very expensive, I suppose?"

Robert Jordan knew quite well he was going too far. He should not even ask that question, no matter *what* the answer. With taxes high and living costs outrageous it was all he could do *now*, on a bookkeeper's salary, to make ends meet. Only this morning Alicia had warned him to think twice before needlessly spending a penny of the money he withheld for himself from his pay envelope.

"There's the insurance next month," she complained, "and month after that the state income tax. And we *must* pay Dr. Hudson something on account pretty soon. If either of us should be taken sick—" she brooded. And, "I don't see why you don't stop smoking. It's nothing but a filthy habit. And we need every penny," said Alicia.

The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. The landlord, the grocer, the laundryman.

But there was something about this watch. . . .

"I suppose it's very expensive?" Mr. Jordan asked again.

The merchant's lips twisted in something that might—or might not—have been the shadow of a smile. He was no longer toying with the chessmen, but had taken from the shelf behind him an ancient dirk, elaborately jeweled of guard and grip. Its twisted blade shone silver clear . . . but the chamois with which he wiped its spotless steel was freshly wet with a dark, unsightly stain.

"What is, costs much," he replied softly. "What might have been, costs all."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," said the merchant. "Nothing at all. I believe forty dollars would be a fair price?"

A fever until now restrained by common sense seized and shook Robert Jordan. Forty dollars! This antique dealer must be mad. At that price the watch was a downright steal. Even Alicia could not complain at his making so shrewd an investment. Should he tire of the watch he could sell it anywhere for twice—five times!—that sum.

Not that he *would* ever tire of it. There was something about this watch which made it his. The mere sight of it roused within him things he had not known—or had forgotten—existed: the daring of the carefree venturer; the ruthless cunning of the financier; the fierce, hot hunger of the moon-impassioned poet; the cold and piercing logic of the knowledge-questing savant . . .

Mr. Jordan wet his lips, fumbled in his pocket for his as yet unopened pay envelope.

"I'll take it," he said hoarsely.

"Of course," said the merchant, and took the crisp new bills Mr. Jordan thrust at him. "It will need setting," he said.

"Yes," said Mr. Jordan. "Yes, I know." He stared at the watch—*his* watch—as a child at a fledgling bird; he cradled it in his hands with the same raw, breathless wonder. "Well . . . goodbye," he said, and turned toward the doorway.

The merchant did not seem to hear him. He was putting the money in a small enameled box, and as he lifted the lid the box chimed forth a tune. Mr. Jordan was sure it was no tune he had ever heard before, yet the music was troublingly familiar, and for some strange reason the words of a half-forgotten song seemed to tremble at the fringes of his memory.

Only when he had reached the threshold did the merchant make reply, and it was not until later that the mean-

ing of his words registered on Mr. Jordan's consciousness.

"Goodbye," he said, "and may you find the happiness you seek, Robert Jordan."

The door opened, and behind him a tiny bell jangled softly as Mr. Jordan stepped out to the street. A clock in a nearby steeple struck the hour—*one*—and he turned the hands of the watch backward. There was a thin *click!* and for a frozen moment he feared something within his precious timepiece had snapped. Then the slow, even ticking resumed . . . the ageless hands pressed forward on their endless circuit . . .

Exactly one o'clock.

As he returned the watch to his vest pocket, a slim figure slipped from the shelter of the wall and to his side.

"Get it, Aces?" asked Blacky.

"Aces" Jordan—gambler and gentleman, connoisseur and con man, rakehell and Robin Hood—fingered his pencil of mustache and smiled the lazy smile which won with equal ease the trust of men and women's hearts.

"Of course," he said languidly. "The old man was a damned fool. Forty bucks! I'd have given him four hundred. Or four thousand if I had to. This watch is worth millions, Blacky. It's a good luck piece. I felt it the minute I laid eyes on it."

"Yeah?" said Blacky. "Well, okay. If you say so." His sharp, impatient eyes darted nervously up the long street and down again. "But it ain't good luck for *us* to stand here like ducks on a rock, Aces. This is Malinetti's territory . . . remember? It ain't healthy for us here."

"Malinetti?" Aces Jordan's laughter dismissed the rival racketeer from existence. "You're shying at bogey men, kid. That greaseball's just a bag of wind on legs."

"Don't kid yourself, boss. Joe means business. He

used to be small potatoes, but he's got an organization now, and he's singing big—"

"Skip it."

"As for his being a bag of wind . . . sure! But even a bag of wind can be dangerous if—"

"Skip it, I said."

Aces Jordan did not raise his voice. But he raised his eyebrows, and the effect was the same. The bodyguard's urgings faltered into silence.

"Okay, Aces," said Blacky.

"Where's the heap?"

"Right over here, boss."

"Let's get going. We've got things to do."

Silently they climbed into the long blue limousine and purred uptown with Blacky at the wheel. Aces Jordan let his head fall back upon the rich, soothing upholstery. There was something troubling him.

But it was not fear of Malinetti or any such picayune problem. It was something disturbingly strange and, to a man of Aces Jordan's iron will and granite self possession, incomprehensibly foreign. A moment ago, as Blacky warned him of Malinetti, there had suddenly flooded upon Aces Jordan an outré sense of dread and insecurity. For a fleeting instant it had seemed to him that he was *not* Aces Jordan at all, but a weaker, paler version of himself. Such a person as—under a different set of circumstances, and under the compulsion of more inhibiting morals—he might have been.

In that brief confidence-sapping moment his memory had recalled the wide-eyed and innocent kid he had been years ago. In the old days . . . the cheap and sordid poverty-stricken days before young Bob Jordan, underpaid clerk in a bank, had discovered a neat and foolproof way of doctoring the balances, and had parlayed his clev-

erness into the position of power and influence now held by Aces Jordan.

Even now it was as if he shared the dark confusion of his mind with that feebler, more fearful, Bob Jordan. He had a weird obsession that he was suddenly become somehow *two* persons . . . and that even as *he* was troubled by this sense of a second presence, somewhere deep within him that other Jordan looked with equal horror on the grotesque situation.

It was a queer feeling, a *damned* queer feeling. He didn't like it a bit.

He was glad when Blacky braked the car before the Shamrock Club, his hideout, home and headquarters. The moment they passed through those paneled doors he sensed the bewildered shrinking of that ubiquitous pseudo-self, lost in unfamiliar surroundings.

Aces Jordan smiled, once more at ease and sanguine master of the world wherein he reigned.

He passed briskly through the track room, loud with the rasp of direct wire returns from the nation's horse-racing centers—(*"Fourth at Floral . . . Stagehand, paying $9.80, $6.20 and $3.60; Miser, paying $7.40"*)—louder with the moans and self-recriminations of the losers. Outside the bar he paused briefly to accept the maudlin back-paddlings of an exuberant refugee from the dice room.

"Look, Aces, ol' boy!" Breathing triumph and whisky, the client waggled a fistful of green before the gambler's eyes. "Three grand! Nine straight passes. How do you like that? Nine straight passes against the house and I walk off with thirty yards! This is my lucky day, huh, Aces, ol' boy, ol' boy?"

"Must be," said Aces Jordan pleasantly. "Must be, Harry. Congratulations."

"Ain't sore, are you, Aces, ol' boy? Wouldn't want you to be sore, ol' pal."

"Not a bit, Harry. Glad to see you win. Only—"

"Mmm?" The victorious one squinted owlishly at the figure wavering before him. "Hey, Aces, ol' boy, ol' boy . . . stan' still, won't you? Only what?"

Aces Jordan shrugged.

"Oh, nothing. Except that . . . if this is your lucky day, aren't you foolish to quit while you're hot?"

"Three grand ahead, Aces, ol' boy! That's the time to quit. When you're ahead."

"Sure, Harry. But if you could make that *ten* grand . . . or *thirty* . . . and *then* quit—"

"We-e-ell—"

Aces Jordan patted his client's shoulder. "Got to play your streaks, Harry. And this is your lucky day. Well, see you later. Good luck!"

He turned away, smiling. Then, to Blacky languidly as the befogged Harry set uncertain course for the dice table. "Okay, kid. Hang the clip on him."

Blacky's lifted brows formed dollar signs.

"All he's got," said Aces. "He can afford it. And I don't like guys to get stiff in my place."

"Okay, boss." Blacky disappeared after the weaving figure as his employer moved on up a wide, carpeted staircase to the more exclusive gaming rooms upstairs.

The croupier's passionless drone—*"Messieurs, mesdames, faites vos jeux"*—breathed through the febrile hush which swayed in tempo to the dry chitter of the dancing ball. All eyes lifted briefly as Aces stopped beside the wheel, and lips smiled mechanical greeting even as the eyes turned again to the table. The croupier offered his rake; Aces refused it with a tiny shake of the head.

"Rien ne va plus," said the croupier. The white ball hissed backward against the motion of the wheel, slowed, caught in a number, clung for breathless instants, then flung itself to another and more tenacious groove.

"Dix-sept, noir, manque, impair," read the croupier quietly, already raking in the lost hazards while with his other hand he deposited neat stacks of chips beside the bets of the winners. *"Messieurs, mesdames, faites vos jeux."*

Aces Jordan turned to go. There was a movement at his side and a soft hand on his arm, blue eyes searching his own with frightened intensity.

"Aces—"

The swift appraising glance of Aces Jordan found youth and beauty, warmth and allure, snared in the virgin form of a trapped Diana. His pulses quickened, but his voice was firm.

"Yes?"

"I . . . I'm Crystal Andrews. I . . . I've done a dreadful thing. That money I just lost . . . five thousand dollars—"

Her voice was like the singing of violins, deep and vibrant. Aces Jordan waited.

"It wasn't mine. I cashed a . . . a forged check."

Aces said, "You shouldn't have done that, Miss Andrews. The money I staked against yours was good."

"I know that, Aces. But I was desperate. I needed money . . . a lot of money . . . badly."

"Andrews? Your father is the banker, isn't he? He'll make the check good, I suppose?"

"No, please!" Panic in eyes smoke-blue, surprising strength in the fingers that clutched his arm. "He mustn't know, Aces. He mustn't know a thing about it . . . not

ever. It would kill him. It . . . it was his name I signed to the check."

"I see," said Aces Jordan slowly. "I see."

"I've got to have it back, Aces. I'll pay you back somehow. I'll do anything you say. Anything."

"Excuse me, Miss Andrews." Aces moved to the wheel and spoke to the croupier quietly. Paper changed hands. Aces returned to the girl. "This is the check?"

"Yes." The violins sang a note of hope. "Yes, that's it. Aces, please—"

Aces Jordan smiled. His slim, strong fingers tore the check into halves, then quarters. "Is that better?" he asked.

The girl's hands on his own burned like a flame.

"Aces, thank you! I'll never forget this . . . never."

Aces Jordan, still smiling, released his hands and slipped the torn fragments into his breast pocket.

"The check will not be cashed," he promised.

"But the . . . the pieces?"

"Are safe. You may get them tonight. My apartment . . . at midnight."

"Your apartment? Tonight . . . at midnight?"

"You'll be there?" asked Aces Jordan pleasantly.

"You . . . you weasel!" Flame in the girl's eyes, the tension of her recoil. For an instant that occult other self helplessly watching from within Aces Jordan's brain thought she would strike her tormentor. Somehow he also knew that if she did so she would win at once respect and freedom. "I . . . come to you? Like a common trull? I'll see you in hell first. I—"

Then suddenly she crumpled; the flame died and the defiance flowed from her. Her lips trembled.

"I'll be there," she said.

"Good!" smiled Aces Jordan. "Until later, then?" He

lifted a passive hand to his lips in gesture of mock gallantry, then turned away. The girl stood staring after him, her eyes dull and lifeless. The voice of the croupier droned its interminable warning.

"C'est fini. Rien ne va plus!"

In the pine-paneled room beyond the roulette salon were seven men: six seated around a baize-topped table, the seventh watching the poker game with tense preoccupation. As Aces entered the players glanced up, nodded, then returned to their world of chance. The watching man stirred eagerly.

"Aces, if you've got a minute—?"

"Hello, Tom. Come into my office."

"Sure. Thanks."

Together the two passed into the *ultima Thule* of Aces' private world, the immaculately professional throne room from which he ruled his empire. Aces waved his guest to a chair.

"Drink?"

"If you don't mind."

"Bubble or branch water?"

"Straight."

Aces Jordan laughed softly. "Must be worse than I thought, Tom. They've been getting to you?"

Tom Lafferty accepted the drink. "Then you heard?"

"A little. How bad is it?"

"The works, Aces. Everything. I'm clean."

"No fooling?"

"They caught me out on a limb. I poured every cent I had into Domestic Aircraft common on a tip. A bum tip. The bears waddled in and—" Lafferty shrugged. "But I didn't come here just to cry on your shoulder."

"I didn't think you did, Tom."

"I'm on your books for a lot of money. Five or ten thousand, I think."

"Eight and a half."

"Okay. I'll lose it; you keep the books. I wanted to ask you if . . . if you'd mind carrying me a while longer? Give me a chance to get back on my feet again?"

Frowning, Aces Jordan traced the curves of a tooled-leather desk pad with a paperknife.

"Got any prospects, Tom?" he asked.

Lafferty flushed. "Nothing worth mentioning. John Todd will take me in as junior partner, but—"

"What's his offer?"

"Twelve thousand a year."

Aces said softly, "And after you've bought the peanuts and cigarettes, what are you going to live on, Tom?"

The speculator's square hands folded and unfolded.

"Look, Aces," he said doggedly, "I didn't come here for a lecture. I know it's not what I'm used to making. But I've been taken, and now I've got to start over. All I'm asking you for is a few months to—"

"Shut up!" said Aces wearily. "I'm thinking." His paperknife circled once, twice, dug sharply into the leather and stopped moving.

"Did you *lose* that aircraft stock?" he asked.

"No. I've still got it. But it's not worth the eight and a half I owe you, Aces."

"Never mind that. How much cold cash would you need to bull the market again?"

"Too much. A hundred thousand. Maybe more."

"Okay." Aces stepped to the far wall, pressed open a panel revealing a wall safe. A moment later he laid a neat stack of bills before the other man. "There's the kitty. If you need more, holler. Now, go get 'em."

Lafferty stared.

"Aces!" he choked. "But listen, Aces . . . I might be wrong. I might lose this, too. I —"

"I'll risk that," said Aces Jordan. "You're into me for almost ten grand now. I've got to get my money back."

"Aces, I'll never forget this. You're the swellest guy I've ever—"

"Get out of here, will you?" said Aces wearily. "The door's behind you. Get out of here, and go earn a lot of dough so I can win it from you . . . sucker!"

Lafferty grinned. "Okay, Aces," he said, and left.

Aces Jordan leaned back in his swivel chair, closed his eyes and pressed them with thumb and forefinger. Given a moment's peace and quiet he might, he thought, shake off that strange feeling of a second presence within himself, watchful and righteously critical of every move he made.

But he found no peace. The interoffice buzzer rasped, and Blacky's anxious voice spoke from downstairs.

"Trouble, boss."

"What's the matter? Harry still running a streak?"

"No. It's Malinetti. He's down here with a couple of hoods."

"Malinetti? In the Shamrock Club? Throw him out!"

Blacky's voice was fretful. "No can do, boss. The law's crusading right now. Pre-election stuff, you know. If we kick up a fuss, and there's any shooting—"

Aces scowled. "Maybe you're right. What does he want, anyway?"

"He wants to see you. On business, he says."

"All right," decided Aces Jordan. "Send him up."

It was a queer feeling. A *damned* queer feeling, as if there were a portion of him, subservient to but still part of Aces Jordan, that feared Joe Malinetti and shrank from this meeting . . .

But it was Aces Jordan, smiling and confident, who rose to greet his unwelcome visitors.

"Hello, Joe. Long time no see. What are *you* doing around these parts?"

Malinetti's black, beetling gaze probed the office, suspicious of every niche and panel. The exaggerated English drape of his coat was more the result of expediency than poor taste in clothing. He said, "I wanna talk to you, Aces."

"Sure," said Aces. "Alone, or with Tweedledee and Tweedledum, here, as witnesses?"

"Who?" Malinetti's brow furrowed. "Never mind the doubletalk, Aces. You know Pete and Bummy. They go where I go. Especially when I come places like this."

"Okay," said Aces easily. "Stick around, Blacky. I seem to be a minority. Well, Joe . . . what's on your mind?"

Malinetti said, "You and Blacky was in my territory an hour ago. What was you doing there?"

Aces Jordan fingered his pencil of mustache. The corners of his mouth curved gently.

"*Your* territory?" he said. "Aren't you spreading out a little? I thought the city streets were still public thoroughfares."

"Look, Aces," growled Malinetti, "I don't like you. And I don't like you muscling in on my territory . . . see? It's got to stop. This time I'm warning you. But the next time you step out of line—"

"Joe—" Aces Jordan reached a sudden decision—"Joe, are you a gambler?"

"Huh?"

"Are you all wind, or have you got guts in that potbelly of yours?"

Malinetti glowered.

"Look here, Aces! One more crack like that—"

"Skip it! Are you willing to take a chance to stop this warfare between us?"

Joe Malinetti frowned. "Whaddya mean?"

"I mean this: I don't like the idea of a thug like you ordering me off certain streets in certain neighborhoods. You're sore because I operate bigger and better and classier rackets in this town than you can ever hope to run." Aces leaned forward. "In other words, this is a big city, but it's too small for the two of us. I'll make you a sporting proposition. We cut a deck of cards. High man takes the works . . . low man gets out. Are you game?"

Malinetti licked his lips. "You're nuts!" he said.

Aces drummed his fingers on the desk.

"Sure! I've got half as much to gain, twice as much to lose, as you have. The Shamrock Club alone takes in more than your whole shabby string of clip joints . . . and I own three more like it. But I'm a gambler. Are you?"

Malinetti's eyes flickered briefly toward the pair at the door, accurately reading the meaning of their expectancy. This was his opportunity to prove that he was a big operator, not just the over-ambitious small time punk he knew himself to be. If he failed to accept this challenge, never again could he compel respect. Someone else would move in, take over the leadership he had forfeited. It was a showdown that couldn't be avoided, averted, or blustered into non-existence.

"Where's the cards?" asked Malinetti hoarsely.

"Get them, Blacky," said Aces Jordan.

Blacky chose a fresh unopened deck from the stacks in a cabinet. Aces tossed it to Malinetti.

"Open it yourself, Joe. Inspect them."

Malinetti thumbed open the deck, fingered the cards with fumbling unease, passed them back.

"Pete? Bummy?" Aces offered the cards. "Will one of you please shuffle them?"

Pete shambled forward, riffled the deck vigorously and stacked it face down on the table.

Aces smiled thinly.

"Okay, Joe. Cut."

Malinetti reached out, hesitated for a long moment, then severed the stack with a convulsive gesture. In the dry silence his sigh was explosive, and Bummy's cry was ear-piercing.

"The queen o' di'monds, boss!"

"Nice card, Joe," said Aces Jordan. Delicately his fingers split the remaining stack, exposing his card. It was the king of spades. "But I seem to have topped it."

Malinetti, his swarthy face suddenly moist with sweat and panic, slashed the cards from the desk with a tempestuous sweep of his arm. His thick voice choked, "The hell with you and your card tricks, Aces! I'm still in business . . . see? If you think I'm gonna—"

"Throw him out, Blacky," said Aces Jordan. "Throw the punk out. Pete . . . Bummy . . . you're working for me now. Go get the rest of your mob. Tell them we'll hold a little conference here at—" He drew his new watch from his pocket—"at nine o'clock tonight. Understand?"

Pete and Bummy mumbled agreement, their shifty eyes carefully avoiding contact with those of their deposed chief. Aces smiled again.

"Well, Joe?"

"I ain't going! You can't make me. I—"

"It is exactly one minute to two," said Aces icily. "I'll give you sixty seconds to get out of this room forever. I'm not fooling, Joe. Better get going."

A tension tangible as substance gripped the room. In

the strained silence the labored breathing of Malinetti was like a metronome counting the dwindling seconds of his rulership. Aces Jordan did not look at Blacky, at Pete, or at Bummy. He watched the long, twisted finger of the watch's minute hand creep slowly toward the perpendicular.

A minute . . . a half minute . . . fifteen seconds. . . five.

"Okay, Joe," sighed Aces. "I warned you. Now—"

Then movement, bewildering-swift and violent. Even as the minute hand touched the hour, Aces was conscious of an angry cry, of Blacky's outraged roar, "*Aces, look out! He's going for it!*" And simultaneously a blurring motion before him, punctuated by the sharp, barking cough of an automatic.

He was aware only of an orange flower of flame that burgeoned before his eyes startlingly, incredibly . . . of a monstrous fist that struck and forced him backward, smashing and tearing its way into his heart . . . of a thin, cold wind blowing bleakly across the wasteland of his waning consciousness.

And then . . .

The door opened, and behind him a tiny bell jangled softly as Mr. Jordan stepped out to the street. A clock in a nearby steeple struck the hour—*one* and he turned the hands of the watch backward. There was a thin *click!* and for a frozen moment he feared something within his precious timepiece had snapped. Then the slow, even ticking resumed . . . the ageless hands pressed forward on their endless circuit . . .

Exactly one o'clock.

As he returned the watch to his vest pocket, a slim

figure slipped from the shelter of the wall and to his side.

"Get it, R. J.?" asked Frazier.

R. J. Jordan—millionaire and martinet, financier and foumart, casuist and Crocsus—fingered his close-cropped mustache and smiled the icy smile that marked alike triumph in matters of person or purse.

"Of course," he snapped. "The old man was a moron. Forty dollars, indeed! Why, I'd have given him four hundred. Or four thousand, if I had to. This watch is worth millions, Walter. It's a good luck piece. I felt it the moment I laid eyes on it."

"Really, sir?" said Frazier. "Yes, of course, sir. If you say so." His pale, uncertain eyes darted nervously up at the steeple clock. "But it's not good luck for *us*, R. J., to waste time like this. The market closes in an hour, sir, and Lafferty may be doing something right now —"

"Lafferty?" R. J. Jordan's laughter dismissed the rival broker from existence. "You're shying at shadows, Walter. Tom Lafferty's whipped, finished, washed up."

"I'm not so sure, sir. Lafferty is nobody's fool. This isn't the first time he's been cornered—"

"Forget it."

"As for his being whipped . . . perhaps. But a beaten man can be dangerous if—"

"Forget it, I said."

R. J. Jordan didn't raise his voice, but he raised his eyebrows. The effect was the same. The slim secretary's urgings faltered into confused silence.

"Very well, sir," said Frazier.

"Where's the car?"

"Right over here, sir."

"Let's get going. We've got things to do."

Silently they climbed into the long black town car and purred downtown with Frazier at the wheel. R. J. Jordan

let his head fall back upon the rich, soothing upholstery. A vague, indefinable something troubled him.

For some strange reason he did not feel *alone*. In his own mind, that is. To him it seemed as if his brain were shared by another weaker, more timorous Robert Jordan. Like . . . oh, almost like the asinine youth he had been before young Bob Jordan, underpaid clerk in a bank, had eavesdropped on a tremendously important conference between two bank executives, and had pyramided his furtive knowledge into the position of power and affluence now held by R. J. Jordan.

It was a queer feeling, a damned queer feeling. He didn't like it a bit. He was glad when Walter braked the car before the massive structure which housed his brokerage. The moment they passed through those grilled doors R. J. Jordan smiled, once more at ease and master of his financial empire.

He passed briskly through the outer offices, hectic with the scurrying of briefcase-laden clerks and speculators—(*"A thousand Big Copper at 93. That's right . . . buy! Watch Steel and Transport. And keep an eye on Aircraft—"*)—louder with the lamentations of poor guessers. Before the board room he paused briefly to accept the vociferous hand pumping of a gleeful client.

"Look, Jordan." The man waggled a scribbled voucher under his nose. "Three grand! That hunch I had on Union Preferred. It jumped three points and I'm in thirty hundred! This is my lucky day, eh, R. J.?"

R. J. Jordan smiled. "It must be, Hodges. Didn't sell out, did you?"

"Sell? Sure I did! I'm ahead of the game—"

R. J. Jordan patted his client's shoulder. "Ought to ride your streaks, Hodges. You may make a real killing. Well, see you later."

He turned away, smiling. Then to Frazier dryly, as Hodges moved thoughtfully toward the bourse. "Go with him, Walter."

Frazier coughed polite query.

"All he's got," said R. J. Jordan. "He can afford a lesson. And I don't like braggarts."

"Yes, sir." Walter disappeared after the uncertain Hodges as his employer moved on up a wide marble staircase to the more exclusive offices upstairs.

The dry chatter of the ticker was the only sound in the hushed private board room. All eyes swiveled briefly from the illuminated tape as R. J. Jordan entered, and tight lips smiled mechanical greeting even as the eyes turned again to the tape. Jordan read the symbols swiftly and noted with approval that Domestic Aircraft was still dropping.

Then he turned to go. But there was a soft hand on his arm; troubled gray eyes sought his own anxiously.

"Mr. Jordan—"

R. J. Jordan's cool, appraising glance found youth and beauty, breeding and gentle grace at his side.

"Yes, Miss Van Dorsten?"

"Something extremely awkward—" she said. "This sudden drop in Domestic Aircraft. It caught me unawares—"

Elspeth Van Dorsten. Her family lived in a mansion on upper Park. So did R. J. Jordan. But *he* had bought from a realtor; *they* had lived there—belonged there—for generations.

"I . . . I was long. I wasn't fully covered. Now I . . . I'm afraid I owe you more than I can possibly raise."

R. J. Jordan said, "That was unwise, Miss Van Dorsten. The market is for investors, not speculators."

"I know that. But I was desperate. I needed money—lots of money—immediately. My father is ill—"

"Yes, your father. He must be told, of course."

She gripped his arm impetuously.

"Please, no! He mustn't know, Mr. Jordan. Father has no money. Our family fortune is gone, but not our family pride. It would kill him to learn I gambled away what little we have left."

"I see," said R. J. Jordan slowly. "I see."

"You've got to give me time, Mr. Jordan. I'll pay you back somehow. I'll do anything you say . . . anything!"

Family. The one thing wealth could not buy. Or . . . could it? A cold glint danced in R. J. Jordan's eyes. This girl . . . and himself?

"Anything?" he repeated thoughtfully. "Do you mean that, Miss Van Dorsten? Anything?"

"Anything. If you'll just give me a chance—"

"Very well. You shall have your chance. Your debt will be forgotten. I shall not sue or press you for payment, Miss Van Dorsten . . . on one condition."

"One condition?"

"I am a bachelor, and a lonely man. Money and power are hollow things when a man has no wife to share them. Do I make my meaning clear?"

"A wife!" There was stark incredulity in the girl's eyes. For an instant that other self merged in R. J. Jordan thought she would laugh. Somehow he knew that if she did so she would be free. "You . . . you can't possibly mean—?"

Then suddenly she crumpled, her defenses shattered.

"Yes. Quite clear," she said.

"Excellent," purred R. J. Jordan. "Until tonight, then? I shall call to meet your family . . . Elspeth." Swiftly, awkwardly, he took her two gloved hands between his fleshy ones, patted them in a wordless gesture of possession.

Then he turned away. The girl stood staring after him, her eyes dull and lifeless.

The moving tape spun on. R. J. Jordan stocks were steadily rising.

At the door of Jordan's private office a waiting figure hailed him, "Oh, say, R. J.! Can you spare a minute?"

"Of course, George. Come in."

Together they entered the pine-paneled inner sanctum. Jordan waved his guest to a chair.

"Brandy?" he suggested.

"Thanks. Make it a double."

R. J. Jordan smiled thinly. "Bad, then, George?"

George Dawson nodded, sipping his drink with gloomy introspection. "It's that damned play, R. J. Seen it?"

"No. But I've heard people talking. Satire, isn't it?"

"That's right. Political satire—political *poison*—directed against *me*. I haven't got a Chinaman's chance of being elected Mayor with that dramatic caricature of my first administration playing to packed houses nine times a week! I look like an utter fool. Everybody in town is laughing at me . . . or at the actor who plays me in '*To the Victor.*' "

Dawson sighed and laid down his empty goblet. "But I didn't come here to wring out the crying towel, R. J. I just wanted to let you know how things stand, that's all. If my party loses the election, the new brooms will start sweeping. They may kick up quite a bit of dust."

"The municipal funds you've dropped on the market?"

"That . . . and other things. I just wanted you to know that you wouldn't be involved. I got myself into this. I'll see it through alone."

R. J. Jordan frowned. He said tightly, "I dislike scandal, George."

The incumbent Mayor shrugged wearily.

"I've already told you that you won't be implicated in any way."

"That's not the point. You say this play's hurting your campaign? How much would it cost to close it?"

Dawson laughed curtly, mirthlessly. "Don't make me laugh, R. J. The thing's a smash hit. Every film company in Hollywood is after the motion picture rights, and the show is a solid sellout for a month. It would cost a fortune to buy it out. A half million, at least."

"Very well." R. J. Jordan pressed a button, spoke into his interoffice phone. "Jenkins? A cashier's check for Mayor Dawson—$500,000. He'll stop by for it in a couple of minutes." Then, to Dawson, "If you need more, say so."

Dawson stammered, "Good God! But listen, R. J., I might be wrong. I might lose the election anyway."

"Run along," said R. J. Jordan brusquely. "I know what I'm doing, George. I want a friend in City Hall. And I don't like poets who write lampooning satires."

Dawson smiled. "You're the boss, R. J." He nodded and left.

R. J. Jordan leaned back in his swivel chair. Why, he wondered, should he have this strange feeling that someone or something within him was watching every move he made? And why should he somehow feel as if he were running a treadmill? Repeating a once-woven pattern? Why? Certainly he had never in his life done these things before. And yet . . .

He found no answer. The intercom phone buzzed, and Frazier's anxious voice spoke from downstairs.

"This is awkward, R. J. Lafferty's here. He wants to see you. On business, he says."

Jordan smiled coldly. "Very well. Send him up."

It was a queer feeling. A *damned* queer feeling. As if

there were a part of him that dreaded this meeting, shrank from it . . .

But it was R. J. Jordan, urbane and confident, who rose to greet his uninvited visitor.

"Hello, Tom. Glad to see you. Sit down."

Tom Lafferty glared at him through hag-ridden eyes. His clothes were rumpled, his hair disheveled. His big hands plucked nervously at his coat pockets. He had been drinking. His voice was thick and furry.

"No, thanks. I prefer to stand."

Jordan shrugged. "As you wish. What do you want? I'm rather busy just now."

"You know damned well what I want. I want you to lay off Domestic Aircraft. What are you trying to do, Jordan . . . break me?"

R. J. Jordan said softly, "I'm not *trying* to break you, Lafferty . . . I've done it. Domestic Aircraft will hit the bottom tomorrow, and so will you."

"You skunk! Why did you do it? Why?"

"Because," said R. J. Jordan, "this town isn't big enough for both of us, Lafferty. I don't like the way you do business, and I don't like your reputation. You consort with cheap crooks and gamblers . . . you drink too much . . . you talk too much. In short, you're a thoroughgoing heel. Anything else you want to know?"

"No," said Lafferty thickly. "You've said enough."

"Good. Then you will do me the very great favor of leaving. I don't enjoy your company."

"No? Perhaps you'd like to try to throw me out?"

"Not I," said R. J. Jordan quietly. "But since it amuses you to be difficult—" He slipped his new watch from his vest pocket, glanced at it—"It is exactly one minute to two. If you're not out of this office in sixty seconds, I'll have you *thrown* out. I'm not fooling, Tom."

A tension gripped the room. In the thick, strained silence the labored breathing of Lafferty was like the ebbing of rebellious waters. Jordan watched the long finger of the minute hand creep slowly toward the perpendicular.

A minute . . . a half minute . . . fifteen seconds . . . five.

"Very well, Tom," sighed R. J. Jordan. "If—"

Then movement, bewildering-swift and violent. Even as the minute hand touched the hour, there was a roar. A sea of flame toppled toward him. He was aware only of a gigantic ram driving him backward, blasting the breath from his lungs, the life from his body.

And then . . .

Mr. Jordan stepped out to the street. A clock in a nearby steeple struck the hour—*one*—and he turned the hands of the watch backward. There was a thin *click!* and for a frozen moment he feared something within his precious timepiece had snapped. Then the slow, even ticking resumed . . . the hands pressed forward on their endless circuit. . . .

Exactly one o'clock.

As he returned the watch to his pocket, a slim figure slipped from the shelter of the wall and to his side.

"Get it, Robin?" asked Linda.

Robin Jordan—lyricist and libertine, rogue and romantic, Don Juan and dramatist—fingered his silky fringe of beard and smiled the scornful smile that mocked alike the deeds and dreams of his fellow mortals.

"Of course," he jeered. "The old man was an idiot. Forty paltry dollars! Why, I'd have given him four hundred. Or four thousand, if I had to. This watch is worth

millions, darling. It's a good luck piece. I felt it the moment I laid eyes on it."

"Yes?" said Linda. "Yes, of course, Robin." Her warm, adoring eyes studied him anxiously. "But it's not good luck for us to be seen in a shady neighborhood like this. If Dawson's really out to get you—"

"Dawson?" Robin Jordan's mirth dismissed the Mayor from existence. "You're tasting the lotus, *ma belle!* Dawson is an empty barrel, a sered corse, a tale told by an idiot . . . full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Linda's voice was troubled.

"I wonder, Robin? He's a powerful man. He has the political machine behind him—"

"I shake, *ma petite.*"

"As for his being an empty barrel . . . maybe so. But even an empty barrel can do damage if—"

"I tremble."

Robin Jordan didn't raise his voice, but he raised his eyebrows. The effect was the same. The girl's disquiet vanished in amusement.

"All right, Robin," said Linda.

"Where's our miserable gas-devouring palanquin?"

"Right over here."

"Bien. Ainsi, avant! We have things to do."

Silently they climbed into the long, cream roadster and purred downtown with Linda at the wheel. Robin Jordan let his head fall back upon the rich, soothing leather. Despite his air of bravado he was not at ease. For some occult reason he could not shake off the feeling that he shared his brain, his innermost being, with another more timid, less talented Jordan. Such a supine being as . . . well, as he had been long years ago, before young Bob Jordan, underpaid clerk in a bank, had taken the bit of ambition in his

teeth, daringly courted the shy Muse of his yearnings, and won his way to the position of fame and power now held by Robin Jordan.

It was a queer feeling. A damned queer feeling. He didn't like it a bit. He was glad when Linda braked the car before the theater where his current success, *"To the Victor,"* was playing nightly to packed houses. The moment they passed through those gilded doors Robin Jordan smiled, once more at ease and master in his world of mime and metre.

He passed briskly through the foyer, strident with the pleadings of box-office blusterers and stagestruck schoolmarms—(*"Sold out? What do you mean, sold out? See here, my good man, I . . . But, please! I simply must have two in the orchestra, center, for tomorrow night"*)—louder with the outrage of disappointed out-of-town visitors. In the lobby he paused briefly to accept the fulsome congratulations of one of the show's backers.

"Look, Robin!" The angel waggled a copy of *Variety* at him. "Three grand! My first week's cut on the box-office receipts . . . three thousand dollars! This is my lucky day, eh?"

Robin Jordan smiled. "Undoubtedly, Sefton. Going to reinvest, of course, aren't you?"

"Reinvest? Well, I hadn't thought of—"

Robin Jordan slapped the theatrical newspaper a bit disdainfully. "A mere bagatelle compared to what you'll earn if you back my *new* show, Sefton. Better climb on the bandwagon. This is your lucky day, you know. Well . . . *au 'voir!"*

He turned away. Then, to Linda wryly, as the excited Sefton turned toward the offices, "Go pluck yon goose, light o' my life."

Linda laughed. "You're going to let him angel *'Demon in Disguise'*? It will fold in a week, Robin."

"You overestimate the public's appetite for poetry," said Robin. "It will close in three days. But Sefton needs a lesson. I dislike mercenary upstarts."

"All right." Linda disappeared after the investor as her consort passed through the lobby to the theater beyond.

A brush-up rehearsal was in progress, and all eyes glanced up briefly as Robin Jordan entered; lips smiled even as the actors' thoughts returned to their mumming. Robin noted with approval that the ingénue had caught the spirit of her characterization, then turned to go. But there was a hand on his shoulder, anxious eyes searched his.

"Robin, old chap—"

Robin Jordan's cool amused glance found disturbed dignity, ruffled assurance, at his side.

"Yes, Conrad?"

"Something a bit . . . awkward. That party at your place the other night. I . . . I'm afraid I wasn't myself—"

"Weren't you?" Robin Jordan smiled. "I found you delightful company, Conrad. And I'm sure Dolores did, too."

Conrad Harkness III bit his lip. "That's just it, Robin. I'm afraid I made myself a bit *too* agreeable to Miss Mendoza. She . . . she seems to want to continue our . . . our little acquaintanceship."

Robin Jordan shrugged. "These Latins, you know."

"Yes, I know. But I'd been drinking. I had no idea Miss Mendoza would prove so . . . persistent. I can't get rid of her. She's been calling my office . . . my home. My wife is beginning to wonder—"

"I see," said Robin Jordan. "I see."

"You've got to call her off, Robin. I'll make it up to you somehow. I'll do anything you say. Anything!"

"Very well, Conrad. Dolores will bother you no more."

"You mean it? You're a great chap, Robin! A true friend—"

"By the way," said Robin Jordan casually, "I'm redecorating my apartment soon, and I'm in rather a spot. Need something vivid and modern for over the fireplace. I think you've just the thing. That ballet girl of yours . . . you know the one I mean? I wish you'd sell it to me."

"Ballet girl. You mean my Degas?"

"That's the one." Robin Jordan smiled. "I don't imagine you'd want anything around to remind you of Dolores, would you, Conrad? Particularly if Mrs. Harkness were to hear about the affair?"

"But—" There was startled wonderment in the errant playboy's eyes, wonderment that turned abruptly into understanding. For an instant Jordan's *alter ego* thought Harkness would stiffen and reject the covert blackmail. Then abruptly the playboy crumpled.

"Why . . . why, yes, of course, Robin," he said. "I'll send you the Degas in the morning."

"Fine," smiled Robin Jordan. "Until later, then?" He turned away. Harkness stood staring after him, biting his lip in impotent chagrin. On the stage the actors rehearsed. A voice spoke the philosophy of Robin Jordan.

"Beauty? There is nothing in life so important as beauty and the love of beauty . . . though we wallow through muck and filth to win it."

At the door of his tiny office within the theater a figure awaited Jordan. "Oh, Robin. Got a moment?"

"Certainly, *mon vieux!* Come in. Drink?"

"Thanks. Make it wormwood and gall."

Robin Jordan smiled. "With or without hemlock? It is true, then?"

Kit Graham nodded, gulping. "You've heard, eh?"

"Merely that the strong arm of orthodox science is lifted to crush you between the anvil of virtue and the hammer of propriety. What have you been doing?"

"Playing with fire," confessed the artist gloomily. Then as his strong hands whitened on the glass, his eyes gleamed. "But a *vital* fire, Robin! The fire of truth, the flame of a magnificent creation. It had to be done!"

"Something about dope, wasn't it?" asked Robin reflectively.

"Something about . . . good God, man! Would you call the pictures of Hogarth 'something about sex'? Or the music of Wagner 'something about legend'? What I'm doing is giving *this* world an eternal symbol of the *other* world that dwells beside it in the dreams, the thoughts, the expressions of the damned and hopeless drug addict.

"When my series of paintings is finished—and it is almost finished, Robin—a whole facet of human existence will have been forever immortalized on canvas. The textbooks can prate all they want to about the 'evils of drug addiction' . . . *I* will have shown the naked face of truth in all its fierce, hot glory . . . and in its degradation. There will be nothing more to say on the subject. Never. Not ever."

"You took a girl," said Robin Jordan, "who had never known life. You painted her in all her youth and innocence. Then you deliberately introduced her to the dubious delights of Our Lady of the Poppies . . . and indulged her every desire as induced by the drugs you fed her. And you painted her over a period of several years in every phase of her addiction?"

"Every phase but the last. That will come soon."

Robin Jordan sighed. "It was murder, Kit. Surely you realize that you killed not only her body, but her soul as well?"

Graham scowled. "Damn it, Robin, I didn't expect *you* to turn penny lecturer, too. I thought you'd understand. But since you're as hidebound and lily-white as the rest—"

"Sit down," said Robin Jordan wearily. "Sit down and shut up. You're mad, of course . . . but I like madmen. Is there no way out of this mess?"

"I'm afraid not. The medical hounds are baying at my heels. I've hidden Manette. But if they find her—"

"If you could get out of the country," mused Jordan. "If you could get to the Islands, you could finish your painting there."

"If!"

"I think it can be arranged. Kit, go home and get ready to leave on an hour's notice. I have friends. I'll find a ship to take you where you can finish your work."

Graham stared.

"What? Robin, you can't mean it! Don't be a fool, man. You'll be aiding and abetting a criminal. You're rich and famous. If you get mixed up in this it may put an end to your career . . . ruin your reputation—"

"Go home," repeated Robin Jordan, "and wait. I'm no infant, Kit. I know what I'm doing. You're a damned fool and so am I, but truth is greater than either of us. And I don't like drum-beating witch-doctors who prey on art."

Graham rose. "Thanks, Robin," he said. "I . . . Oh, the hell with it! Goodbye." And he left.

Robin Jordan leaned back in his chair. It was still with him, that *outré* feeling of a second presence. A presence that looked with horror on his every action. Why, he wondered? Was he ill? Or . . .

The telephone rang, and Linda's anxious voice spoke.

"Robin? The Mayor wants to see you. On business."

Jordan smiled. "Send him in, Linda."

It was a queer feeling. A *damned* queer feeling. Almost a presentiment. He shouldn't grant this interview. Some warning call within him cried that to do so was folly . . .

But it was Robin Jordan, mocking and gay, who rose to greet his unexpected visitor.

"Hello, Mayor. This *is* a surprise."

George Dawson said heavily, "I'll say what I have to say quickly, Jordan, and get out. I want you to close this play of yours."

Robin Jordan lifted an amazed eyebrow.

"You're jesting, Your Honor," he jeered. "Surely even *you* must know successful plays don't close at one man's edict?"

"Stop grinning, you impudent blackguard! What are you trying to do, anyway? Ruin my career?"

"You," said Robin Jordan, "did that yourself, Dawson. You did that years ago when you became a cheap money-grubbing politician instead of a spokesman for the public you pretend to serve. *'To the Victor'* hurts you and will kill your chances for re-election because it truthfully depicts a cross-section of the intrigue your administration has spawned."

Dawson scowled.

"What's all this to you? You're a poet and a playwright, not a politician."

"I love truth," said Robin Jordan, "in all its many guises. And I don't like you, Dawson. I don't like your filthy political machine, or the crooked investment brokers who stand behind you, or the way you part your hair. I'm also tired of talking to you. So will you be good enough to leave now?"

"You dare order me out of your rathole?"

"I do," said Robin Jordan quietly. He slipped his new watch from his pocket, glanced at it. "It is now one minute to two. If you're not out of this office in exactly sixty seconds, I'll have you *thrown* out. I'm not fooling."

In the thick, strained silence Dawson's breathing was labored. Jordan watched the long minute hand creep slowly toward the perpendicular.

A minute . . . a half minute . . . fifteen seconds . . . five.

"Very well," sighed Robin Jordan. "Since you—"

Then movement, bewildering-swift and violent. Even as the minute hand touched the hour, sound battered and raged at Robin Jordan's eardrums. The thrust of a searing lance doubled him, then the flame of rending pain was chilled by keening gales.

And then . . .

A clock struck the hour—*one*—and he turned the hands of the watch backward. There was a thin *click!*—then the slow, even ticking resumed. The hands pressed on . . .

Exactly one o'clock.

As he returned the watch to his vest pocket, a slim figure slipped from the shelter of the wall and to his side.

"Get it, Doctor?" asked Sorrel.

Dr. Robert Jordan—savant and surgeon, physician and Pharisee, Lycurgan and logician—fingered his long, close-shaven upper lip and smiled the tight smile that marked alike his moments of fortune and failure.

"Of course," he said crisply. "The old man was mad. Forty dollars, indeed! I would have given him four hundred. Or four thousand if I had it. This watch is worth—" Only his ingrained repugnance to exaggeration restrained the impulse to say "millions"—"is worth a considerable

sum of money, Douglas. It's a . . . a good luck piece. I felt it the moment I laid eyes on it."

"Really, Doctor?" said Sorrel. "Yes, I dare say." His bright, querulous eyes studied his superior thoughtfully. "But it's not . . . uh . . . good luck for us to be seen around here. Graham's studio is somewhere in this part of town."

"Graham?" Dr. Jordan's laugh dismissed the artist from existence. "Graham can't harm me. He'll be behind bars soon, the scoundrel."

"I wonder, sir? He has influential friends."

"I too have influence."

"As for his not harming you . . . even a trapped rat is dangerous when—"

"That will do, Douglas."

Dr. Jordan didn't raise his voice, but he raised his eyebrows. The younger man's urgings subsided.

"Very well, Dr. Jordan."

"Where is the car?"

"Right over here."

"Good. Let's go. We have things to do."

Silently they climbed into the small black sedan and drove downtown with Sorrel at the wheel. Dr. Jordan let his head fall back upon the upholstery. He was curiously ill at ease. There was a strange feeling upon him. A feeling of . . . of what? Duplication? It was hard to say. But for some reason he seemed to share himself with another meeker, less confident personage. A second self, much like . . . well, like the person *he* had been years ago, before young Bob Jordan, underpaid clerk in a bank, had discovered his precise logical talents, studied for the medical profession, and won to the position of eminence and respect now held by Dr. Jordan.

It was a queer feeling, a deuced queer feeling. He didn't

like it a bit. He was glad when Douglas braked the car before the Medical Arts Building. The moment they passed through its revolving doors Dr. Jordan smiled, once more at ease and master of a world where reason reigned.

He passed briskly through the lobby, faintly astir with the hushed queries of patients—(*"Dr. Thompson, please? About some X-rays"*)—and paused briefly to accept the glowing gratitude of a man waiting there.

"Dr. Jordan, I can't thank you enough for curing my little boy. I'm terribly grateful. If there were some way in which I could show my appreciation "

"There is," said Robert Jordan crisply. "The Memorial Hospital needs a new children's ward. You can endow one, Mr. Phillips. Douglas!"

"Yes, Dr. Jordan?"

"Go with Mr. Phillips. He wants to write a check."

"Yes, sir." Sorrel disappeared with the grateful but somewhat dazed philanthropist-to-be as his senior took the elevator to the offices upstairs.

In the corridor a group of internes waited for a descending elevator. All eyes turned to Dr. Jordan briefly, and lips smiled even as the students' eyes returned to the dial. Dr. Jordan noted with approval that they were a clean, fresh-looking group of young men, then turned to move on. But there was a hand on his arm; worried eyes sought his.

"Dr. Jordan?"

Dr. Jordan's dispassionate glance found youth and vigor but raw discomfiture in the figure at his side.

"Langdon, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I . . . There's something I must tell you, sir. Something terribly awkward. That exam last week—"

"Yes?"

Herbert Langdon flushed. "I . . . I cribbed on it, sir. I had to tell you. I didn't deserve the high grade I got."

"I see," said Dr. Jordan. "I see."

Langdon's voice was husky.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. I guess I . . . I don't belong in this profession. But if you'll give me a chance I'll make it up to you, somehow. I'll do anything you say. Anything."

"The grades have been recorded, Langdon. They need not be changed now."

"You . . . you mean it, sir? Then you won't tell?"

"I see no reason," said Dr. Jordan calmly, "for advising the hospital authorities that one of our recent graduates committed the folly of cribbing a final examination. You have a good medical education, Langdon. You will make an excellent specialist in contagious diseases. An internship is open."

"A specialist in contagious—"

"Quite. You *are* volunteering in the morning . . . aren't you?"

His eyes met those of the younger man firmly, challengingly, uncompromisingly. Herbert Langdon colored. Then his eyes fell. "Yes, Doctor," he said. "In the morning."

"Fine!" smiled Dr. Jordan. "Good luck . . . Doctor." He turned away. Langdon stood staring after him, stunned and uprooted by this sudden change in his every plan . . .

In the anteroom of his private offices a patient awaited Dr. Jordan. She rose nervously as he entered. "Robert! May I . . . may I see you a minute?"

"Alicia! Of course. Come in. You're trembling, my dear. Here . . . let me mix you a sedative."

The woman tried to smile. The effort was a failure.

"Haven't you anything more . . . permanently quieting?"

Dr. Jordan said gently, "Then it's that bad?"

"You know? You've heard?"

Robert Jordan nodded. "Dr. Warren told me."

"It's incurable," she said dully. "A year, perhaps, of reasonable comfort. Then the bad part. For another three or four months until . . . until—"

Her eyes clouded, and she faltered to a stop.

"But you know all that as well as I, Robert. I didn't come here to play the coward."

"I know that, my dear."

"It's the life I've led these past ten years, Robert. I can see that now. Oh, it was fun for a while; the nights of dancing and drinking, the parties; all that. I should have known it couldn't go on forever."

"Yes, Alicia. The human body is a delicate organism. It will stand only so much abuse before it breaks down."

"I should have married *you,* Robert, instead of him. Ten years ago, when you asked me. Do you remember?"

Robert Jordan said, "I remember, Alicia."

"You were always sane and healthy, clean in your outlook on life. If I'd married you, this never would have happened. We'd still have years before us. Years of happiness—"

Dr. Jordan said, "You chose wisely, Alicia. I had nothing to offer you. I was only a poor bank clerk. I had no future. Nothing but ambitions and desires."

"You've made your future. You've won your desires, fulfilled your ambitions. We could have done it together."

"Could we?" Robert Jordan smiled a trifle sadly. "I wonder? Those first years were hard. With a wife to care for—perhaps children, too—I might never have had the courage to carry on. I might still be poor Bob Jordan, the bank clerk."

"No! Never! Success is a part of you, Robert . . . success in anything you set your heart on."

"Let's try to forget that old dream, Alicia. You came here today to ask me . . . what?"

"A favor, Robert. One small favor for old times' sake."

"Yes?"

"Just this. Not today—not this year, even—but later, when the going gets too hard for me, will you . . . will you help me?"

There was silence for a long and painful moment.

"You know what you're asking, Alicia?"

"Yes."

"The code of the medical profession—"

"I'm asking this because of . . . yesterday, Robert."

Robert Jordan rose abruptly, walked to a cabinet at the far end of the room and selected a vial from its contents. Alicia's bag lay on the desk. He slipped the bottle inside. He spoke very quietly.

"Life is highly uncertain, Alicia. They have told you that you have a year and a half. I have, apparently, twenty years before me . . . perhaps more. But who knows? There are automobile accidents, plagues, a thousand and one things. Therefore you should have this now.

"Only . . . keep hoping, my dear. Use it only as a last resort. You will do that?"

"Yes, Robert. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart—"

"I don't understand, Alicia," said Dr. Robert Jordan evenly. "I merely gave you some sleeping tablets. Remember to use them with caution. More than three at a draft might be fatal. And now, if you'll excuse me?"

"Yes." Alicia Adams—who under other circumstances might have been Alicia Jordan—rose. For an instant she hesitated. Then, "Goodbye, Robert," she said. And she left.

Dr. Jordan leaned back in his chair. He was filled with a sense of dread, of foreboding. Not because of what he had just done . . . or allowed to become possible. That, as a scientist, he could condone despite the ethical code under which his profession labored. No, it was something else. Something . . .

The telephone rang, and it was young Sorrel again.

"Dr. Jordan? Graham. He's here to see you."

"Really? Send him up."

It was a queer feeling. A *devilish* queer feeling. That sense of a second presence was deeper now. It had strengthened. It was a puzzle that needed, *demanded*, solving.

Dr. Jordan was a logical man. Above all things, his life was based on the firm, immobile tenets of pure thought. This was a problem which must be faced and coped with. He plunged himself into it, no longer striving to thrust from his confused mind that other personage, but welcoming its presence. Permitting it, *inviting* it, to permeate his every fiber of being . . . to take control of his brain and body . . .

It was cloudy at first, dim as a wraith in gray night mists, tenuous and uncertain. Dr. Robert Jordan . . . Bob Jordan. Dr. Jordan . . . Bob Jordan. Doctorjordanbobjordan . . . doctorjordanbob . . .

And suddenly, frighteningly, it was *there!* The whole of it . . . all of them were there. Doctor Jordan . . . Bob Jordan . . . Robin and Aces Jordan . . . their diverse yet weirdly similar personalities weaving and twisting, spiraling and merging one with another, becoming many-angled facets of a single whole. And the floodgates of unlocked memory flung wide open, showing him snatches of those other Jordan lives as clearcut figures captured in the opalescence of eternity.

The watch! *"Goodbye . . . and may you find the happiness you seek, Robert Jordan."* May you rise from your miserable pit of anonymity, bank-clerk Jordan, and see the man you might have been under other circumstances. May you see what came of those traits repressed within your servile self: the daring of the carefree venturer you had not known or had forgotten existed; the ruthless cunning of the financier; the fierce, hot hunger of the moon-impassioned poet; the cold and piercing logic of the knowledge-questing savant . . .

The watch! The watch whose antique hands, forever pressing on an endless circuit, evermore started at the hour of one when it became his own, evermore faltered at the fateful hour of two to hurl its owner back, back, through ageless and unfathomable time to another pathway of the lives that might have been.

And yet . . . and yet how strangely intermingled were those lives. In one the hated foe became the friend; in one the cherished friend became the instrument of death. Faces and names swirled giddily before him as phantasms dancing in a fevered dream. Malinetti . . . Dawson . . . Lafferty . . . Graham . . . Alicia . . .

Alicia. In *this* life Dr. Jordan had helped her, as in another the tycoon Jordan had helped Dawson. But Dawson had slain *Robin* Jordan. On yet another pathway might not Alicia even now be waiting patiently, grimly, coldly, to rid herself forever of the poor bank clerk Jordan who by marrying her had robbed her of every chance for happiness, the fun and laughter she so ardently desired?

Dr. Robert Jordan did not know. But this he *did* know: that there were footsteps outside his door, and that soon would enter his office the violent Kit Graham whose dastard degradation of an innocent girl Dr. Jordan had exposed to the authorities. And that Graham would be

armed, Dr. Jordan was positive. It was inevitable. It was a part of the taut and inescapable pattern . . .

Inescapable? With a cry Dr. Jordan leaped from his seat, hope suddenly burning hot within him. Perhaps not. For the hands of the watch—he drew it from his pocket and scanned its face eagerly—lacked still ten minutes of two o'clock.

Then there might still be a way out, an escape from the intermeshed gears into which he had been cast. The watch was the cause of his turmoil. If he could find the shop from which it came . . . return it before the fateful hour . . .

He thrust a startled Graham from his path in his headlong flight from the office. The elevator, then the street. No time to search for Sorrel. But a wild, careening drive through midday traffic, oblivious to the enraged cries of scampering pedestrians, the belligerent honkings of other cars. Thrice whistles signaled him to stop, and thrice Dr. Robert Jordan, stanch exponent of law and order, ignored them. A dozen times traffic lights flamed crimson with embarrassment as he plunged through them recklessly.

He slammed the brakes to a screaming stop before the tiny shop, literally hurled himself from the car. He snatched the watch from his pocket, found with horror that but one minute remained. He had raced with Fate and lost. Somehow, one minute hence, death would find Dr. Robert Jordan. And phoenix-like, another Jordan would rise to pursue the endless quest.

No time, now, to return the watch to the shop. But there was one last chance . . .

A minute.

One last and slender chance of getting himself out from under the crushing weight of an eternal reincarnation . . .

A half minute.

One way to cancel out the spiraled past, bring an end to the multifold future . . .

Fifteen seconds.

He lifted the watch high. Even in his passion it was a painful thing to do. But it had to be done. He dashed it to the pavement precisely as the clock in a nearby steeple groaned to strike the hour. There were golden shards gleaming in the sunlight, and the tinkle of breaking glass. A hot and dazzling vertigo danced before his eyes, and a wind from beyond the world chilled him to the bone.

Then . . . peace. Quiet. The even tenor of a sane and normal existence. Himself walking along a street . . . pausing before a shop window . . .

At the moment he laid eyes upon the watch, Robert Jordan experienced a strange and most disquieting sensation: that of having somewhere, sometime, seen it before.

—Which was, of course, a whimsical conceit, because the timepiece lay in the window of a dingy antique shop on a back street he had never previously explored. It was an odd watch, odd and very beautiful. Challengingly beautiful. It not only invited but compelled closer inspection.

Mr. Jordan hesitated briefly, then opened the door and stepped into the shop . . .

IV

"Take My Drum to England"

Saint Mulligan

The Monster from Nowhere

"TAKE MY DRUM TO ENGLAND . . ."

"Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low . . ."

IT WASN'T so much the retreating that got Thompson. That was bad enough. But leaving the heavy ordnance; that was what griped his guts. Even grenaded tanks, damaged cannon, stripped caissons and lorries were valuable booty to the steel-starved Jerries; they would melt down what weapons they could not repair, recast them, and one day use English arms to war on English people.

But it was unavoidable, just as this dogged retreat was unavoidable. The collapse of the Belgian left wing gave the trapped B.E.F. bitter alternatives: flight or surrender . . . and they had already had a bellyful of the second in Leopold's sudden, devastating capitulation.

Thompson trudged on. Above him high shells screamed and whined, unseen behind the slow, dripping pall of a gray mist and the blacker smudge from a hundred unfought fires now tightening like an eager, crimson claw about Dunkerque. Overhead the roar of airplane motors merged in thudding cacophony with the bite and chatter of machine guns; pompoms fretted raggedly from the shelter of emplacements about him. There was no moment of silence, no rest for ears beaten sickeningly acute by an interminable torrent of sound.

How long his world had been like this Thompson no longer knew. Days . . . weeks . . . he could not remember. He had not slept for centuries; had not shaved or

washed in an aeon. There had been no canteen since the battle began; he had long since eaten the last of his emergency rations.

Yet one supply line had been maintained. In spite of everything, an inexhaustible stream of ammunition fought its way up from behind to feed hot, hungry guns. The Nazis were paying in human coinage, Thompson thought grimly, for every inch of terrain reluctantly granted by the British. He had seen with his own eyes the havoc created amongst fast, tiny advance tanks by Allied artillery, had seen decimated foray parties consolidate new gains behind gray-green breastworks that still bled.

Yet they still advanced. And now . . .

And now there was a messenger wrenching to a stop beside the barbed nest which was Thompson's post. Waving, motioning, shouting words half indistinguishable to tumult-deafened ears.

The word "beach" was distinct, and that made the entire message clear. It meant that Thompson now left the ranks of those dwindling few who under cover of an incessant barrage from the navy guns maintained a defensive rear-guard action for their retreating comrades, and became himself one of those who fled.

Others about him were rising from strategic covers; from doorways, from rude barricades and shelters filtered a slow stream of weary troops. Thompson knew a vague wonder that this formless battalion should yet uphold order in its forced withdrawal. Wonder and strengthening pride. In this company were soldiers of a dozen divisions, many leaderless, yet there was little confusion and no panic. Blue, gray and khaki uniforms formed one ordered column headed by officers who gave commands in different tongues.

They were no longer Britons or Frenchmen, Dutch or

Norwegians. They were Allied soldiers, fighting in an allied cause.

Thompson found a place in the column. Overhead the sky droned with the hum of invisible motors; the coughing of cannon from the nearby shore was like the thunder of massive waves. Not all the defenders fell in. A skeleton force remained to cover this last retreat. They stuck to their posts with full knowledge of what must follow. One of these found Thompson's eye upon him, parted his stubbled lips in a grin, and gestured with closed fist, thumb stiffly erect.

Thompson answered the gesture in kind.

"Thumbs up!"

Then a command, and the motley column shrugged into motion . . .

The men on the front defense line had not been kept in ignorance as to their purpose. Word had sifted to them of the miracle transpiring on Dunkerque beach. But somehow the legend of that mass embarkation had seemed to Thompson a far implausibility until he saw it with his own eyes.

The city of Dunkerque was a smoking ruin. Thompson found no reminder in this shell-warped town of the Dunkerque he had once visited in the happy days before Warsaw. Rosendaël was a suburb peopled with ghosts who peered from behind shuttered windows, ghosts of women and children and aged men wakened from hiding by the dry *sough-sough* of marching feet.

The once wide, well-paved streets were crater-pocked where bombs had dropped and mountainous with crumbled debris where shells had found a mark. Unchecked fires had withered whole rows of deeprooted homes. In the Place Jean Bart the statue of David d'Angers stared

fiercely, defiantly, out upon a vista of chaos. The belfry of St. Eloi was fallen, and one priceless cornice of the chapel of Notre Dame des Dunes, bomb-struck, had sheered away, exposing the sacred shrine . . . anomalously chaste and quiet in the murderous heat of battle.

But it was not these sights that quickened Thompson to new life. This was war; this was war's normal, wasteful toll. It was his first sight of the sea that wakened in his throat an echo of the murmur that swelled through the column of marching men.

The sea . . . and the fleet!

Short months ago this had been a brave harbor with docks and quays beside which great ships might make mooring. Now it had felt the force of the Nazi air armada. Its docks were ribbons of shredded timber, its miles-long quays broken and bent as if crumpled in a giant fist. The harbor channel bristled with the shards of sunken craft; not the most agile merchantman could thread that unnatural shoal to take aboard a human cargo.

And yet the evacuation was taking place.

From north and south and east, from St. Pol-sur-Mer and blazing Malo-les-Bains, from the canal banks and the low hills, came the retreating columns. Not in confusion nor in rank disorder, but in smooth, accomplished withdrawal, their lines converging on the open beach.

There, sheltered by rolling dunes to the northward, the column marched out into the waiting sea. Their line was a gigantic S writhing through the shallows to where in the gray distance a galaxy of craft stood by to take them on.

To north and south, so far as the eye could see, in two unyielding lines stood the warships of the fleet: grim, gaunt bulldogs of the sea, now welded prow to stern. And on each fighting vessel the guns had been so faced as to form a corridor between the rows. Skyward boomed the

cannon; their ceaseless bombardment wove an arch of raking crossfire through which not even a gull might fly.

And in the broad avenue of safety thus created rescue vessels plied tirelessly back and forth, on each trip scooping another handful of the human flotsam that breasted the gray sea.

Beside Thompson someone murmured. It was young Owens who—or so Thompson had heard—was a poet of sorts. A sort of second Brooke, perhaps, though he didn't much look the part now, what with a week's growth of beard and that filthy bandage about his head.

"And they said the spirit of Nelson was dead," said Owens. "The spirit of Nelson and Drake—"

Then there was no time for reply, for the order was still forward. The sand gritted beneath Thompson's boots, the water was icy cold about his ankles and calves and thighs.

When his brain was so benumbed that it quite forgot the cold, when he could no longer remember why or how he had come here, or any world other than this breast-high grave of water into which, forward, he endlessly wallowed, Thompson's eyes lent him a sudden, startling knowledge. He had reached the tip of the sea groping column. Somehow, few by few, the men in the queue before him had melted into the bee-swarm of yachts, dories, skiffs, shuttling back and forth beneath the curtain of gunfire. Soon, now, it would be his turn.

The realization was a shock stirring Thompson into his first considered action for hours. He turned and looked back at the falling city, saw that the thick, black, greasy smoke was now a solid wall about Dunkerque, and that an ever-narrowing band of flame tightened about the town, spiraling scarlet fingers into the creeping dusk.

The sea, which had been leaden-gray, was now a dull jet-purple, and the black night sky pressed heavily upon

the lingering line of horizon daylight. The coughing naval guns spat salvos of orange flame; black hulks loomed suddenly in brief relief, were swallowed in instant darkness; rain began to fall, its freshness warm and sweet upon Thompson's salty, blue-cold lips.

The last thin lines of light snuffed out, and it was starless night.

For the first time a sort of panic swept over him. A lost, cold, lonely terror. Muted flashes dotted the water before him, behind him a voice moaned softly, and once there was a muffled splashing of oars at his side though his straining eyes saw nothing. He cried aloud, his voice strange and harsh to his ears.

"Here!"

Then a hand groping at his arm, a familiar voice.

"Thompson? That you, old boy?"

It was Owens. His nearness, the commonplace sanity of his question, calmed Thompson. It was so weird and silly and brave, so altogether damned British. For the emotion he showed they might have met at Piccadilly, not breast-deep in water where Dunkerque basin joined the choppy Channel rip.

"Right," said Thompson. "Damned cold, eh?"

"Filthy. We're almost out, though. Thumbs up!"

"Thumbs up!" said Thompson.

It was as if their voices were a beacon in the dark emptiness. Something brushed Thompson's shoulder, a grating oarlock whimpered, a dim flashbeam dazzled him momentarily, and warm, strong hands were beneath his armpits.

" 'Ere you are, mitey! A little 'oist does it. Up you come, now!"

After the swaying sea, the dory's boards were hard and firm and wonderful. He lay there panting heavily, not hearing the whispers about him nor feeling the bitter cold,

the damp, bruising crush of other bodies clambering aboard. He hardly knew when the little boat, so laden that its gunwales cupped the breakers, heeled slowly on the last leg to safety.

He only knew the journey took too long, the rowers were making heavy weather of their task. The dory wallowed in the trough, gulping water with each forward surge. More than thirty souls crammed space planned for a score. There was barely room for the oarsmen to pull. Men began bailing with pans and trench helmets and cupped hands, but the rain and washing breakers laughed at their efforts. Slowly but inevitably the dory dipped deeper, heavier.

And the fleet too far away to help. Thompson felt a slow sense of despair creeping over him. This had been a losing fight from the beginning. Dunkerque had been a lost cause, the mass evacuation a madman's dream. Even the gods of sun and sky pledged the swastika banner; even the god of the sea, whose realm had been Britain's pride for more than four centuries. Still he bailed; he did not know his hands were cracked and cold and bleeding.

The thunder of the guns rolled tumultuously. Once a great, winged bird of prey burst into flame high above them, flashed like a meteor into the stifling caldron of the sea, hissing in stricken agony. Far across the water a sailboat limned its brief red outline against the sky, spewing black motes into the water about it.

Still he bailed.

And then suddenly there was no longer need of his efforts. A last great breaker welled over the dory's prow. A score of voices lifted as one; the small boat trembled and rolled. Struggling bodies returned to the waters from which they had been taken . . . but this time there was no sand bottom on which to stand. Strange hands clutched

at Thompson as if he were a buoy. He broke free, struck out for the far safety of the fleet, not hoping to make his goal. Choking for air, he gulped a lungful of water; he strangled and spat. Salt was bitter in his throat.

He felt himself sinking, and a strange lethargy was upon him. He found himself wondering if this were to be the end, if thus he were to escape the Dunkerque shambles? Once more he fought his way to the surface, essayed a few feeble strokes. There was a maddening, dull throbbing in his ears like the distant roll of summer thunder . . . or the rumbling of a far and ancient drum . . .

Then the miracle was complete, for once again there was a ship beside him. Only this time it was a tiny sailing vessel. Its longboats were down, its sailors hauling in the survivors of Thompson's sunken dory. The refugees at last had found a haven.

What happened in the next little while was confused and uncertain. There were great, rough blankets around him, cutting the chill from aching bones; there was grog, hot and fragrant in huge pewter mugs. Then escape from the sea, the rain and the night into a bunk room below decks, a wee cabin ill-lighted by a greasecup lamp with floating wick.

Thompson slumped into a bunk. He must have dropped asleep then, for when a hand shook him some time later the concussive bellow of cannon fire had faded into a dull, soft silence broken only by the groan of straining planks and the shatter of waves on ancient, sturdy wood.

It was Owens who had wakened him. An Owens no longer grimy and bearded, but fresh and clean and eager. The bandage was gone from his head, and his voice was tense with excitement.

"How can you sleep at a time like this, old fellow? Come

on deck and watch. It's marvelous! Just like that old poem of Newbolt's—remember?" His eyes shone; he quoted:

"Yarnder lumes the island, yarnder lie the ships,
Wi' sailor lads a-dancin' heel an' toe,
An' the shore lights flashin', an' the night tide dashin'—"

They went up; Owens leading, Thompson following. It was still black night when they reached the rail, but it had stopped raining. The great, near stars of early summer laid a frost of faint unearthly silver on the ship. The port of Dover was a rising smudge marked by the dimmest of beacons. And from the mainland Thompson heard, as before, a dull and drumlike rolling.

About him, wraithlike in the gloom, huddled the men who had been his companions at Dunkerque and in the dory. A silence was upon them as they watched the shore loom nearer. Somewhere abaft a slow winch moaned; ghost figures in rolled pantaloons labored at tasks unfathomable.

From somewhere high in the rigging came the warning cry of the lookout. A deep voice bellowed answer in a sturdy Devon accent. Wood screeled on wood, sheets flapped and wove and bellied again to the wind.

Thompson said shakenly, "We're safe, Owens. It's a miracle. I never expected to see England again."

"He promised," said Owens softly, incomprehensibly. "He said he would be waiting 'till the great Armadas come.'" He lifted his face to the stars. "Hear his drum? There was need of him, the waiting drum was struck, and he has come . . . as he said he would. Remember, Thompson? He said:

"Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low;

If the foe sights Devon, I'll quit the port o' Heaven,
An' drum them up the Channel as we drummed them
long ago—"

"*Who* said?" demanded Thompson. "What are you talking about? I don't understand—"

Then suddenly there were footsteps approaching him, the firm, crisp grate of leather on salt-encrusted boards, and a Devon voice, friendly but regretful in his ears.

"There has been a mistake here, soldier lad. Ye ha' no place aboard this ship. The shore is tha place, with tha fellows."

And how it happened Thompson did not rightly know, but of a sudden there was no longer strong planking beneath his feet; there was instead once more the salt and wet and frightful cold of churning Channel waters. He cried out fearfully, and glimpsed for an instant the white, startled face of Owens leaning over the rail above him.

Beside Owens stood another figure, that of the captain of the sailing vessel. His cheeks were lean and strong and bearded, and his eyes were filled with a great pity, but with a great power, too. And he called a message to Thompson, his clarion words half drowned in the rolling crescendo of drums from the nearby shore.

"Tell England to be o' good cheer!" he cried. "Tell England all will yet be well wi' her!"

Then he raised an arm in salute. The ship splashed into the belly of a black-green trough, heeling about. For an instant cold starlight glinted on its stern . . . then the vessel and captain and crew alike were gone.

Thompson's flailing arm met and clung to a drifting solid, and life was a flaming spark within his frozen body. His strident cry lifted again and yet again. The probing finger of a searchlight sought and found him . . .

When they had parted his cold, blue lips and forced hot brandy between his locked teeth, Thompson tried to give them his message. His voice was like the grating of a blade on paper as he gasped the words.

"All will be well . . . with England."

The young doctor, red-eyed with fatigue, nodded and motioned him to silence.

"That's right, soldier. Now rest a while." To his companion he murmured, "Keep him in hot blankets. He's that far from pneumonia. He must have caught it bad."

"Rotten bad. Floated in on an overturned dory, the only one of his boatload who made it. Hours in the Channel, poor devil."

"The drums—" said Thompson.

"Of course, soldier. Try to sleep now." The man in white shook his head. "Exposure. Cold. Surf beating in his ears for hours. No wonder he hears drums."

Thompson stirred fretfully. His mind was beclouded by alternate tempests of heat and cold that swelled over him in fierce, devastating waves; the voices of his friends were lost in thin, singing distances. And it angered him that he could not seem to make them understand.

He wanted rest. But he could not rest until he had told them of the boat that brought him here. He had to make them understand about the boat and its captain. He must let them know the drum had not been struck in vain . . . that he had seen the sternplate of that vessel as it vanished Channelward, and that the legend gilded there had spelled *Golden Hynde* . . .

He tried again to bear the message given him.

" 'Tell England to be of good cheer,' he said. 'All will be well with her,' *he* said."

"*Who* said, soldier?"

"It was . . . Drake. Sir Francis Drake. He has come back . . . as he promised he would."

"Fever," said the young doctor, and laid a cool hand on Thompson's forehead. "He's delirious, poor devil. Keep him well covered . . ."

SAINT MULLIGAN

I ittle he deem'd—that Holy man!—
Of old Nick's wiles, and his fraudful tricks

IT'S NOT so much what a man does that matters; it's whom he does it for. There are about ten million people in greater New York. For almost any of these Patrolman Patrick Mulligan could have done what he did and no more would he have earned for his efforts than a careless nod or—at most—a little cash something wherewith to bathe the esophagus. But as it was . . .

Well, it happened this way:

"Flannerty," read Mrs. Mulligan aloud. "Aloysius X. Benedict Flannerty, who was yestiddy permoted to Lootenant in the Traffic Squad—" She laid down the morning paper with a rustle of indignation. "So!" she said. "So!"

Officer Mulligan hunched doggedly over his breakfast. "Another cup o' coffee, will ye, Bridget? And a slice o' toast? There's a good girl."

"Al Flannerty!" said Mrs. Mulligan.

"It looks," ventured Pat, "like rain. The weather, I mean; not the coffee. I'll be wearin' my raincoat."

"Two years you'd been poundin' a beat," said Bridget irately, "when he joined the Force. An' now look at the pair of ye! *You're* still Patrolman Mulligan, an' *he's* Lootenant Flannerty, with bars on his shoulders an' his pixchure in the morning paper! *Arragh*, what a man I married! Me, that could have had my pick of—"

"An' my rubbers as well," decided Mulligan. " 'Twill likely be wet underfoot. Come to think of it, never mind the toast. I'd best be runnin' along. 'Bye, mavourneen!"

And he beat a hasty retreat. But it was a strategic withdrawal in no way victorious. Pat knew all too well he had won but a temporary respite. By suppertime, Bridget would have marshaled all the accusations, incriminations, and arguments now seething within her into one devastating force . . . and from this second assault there would be no escape.

Mulligan sighed, methodically wending his way toward the busy intersection which was his traffic post. No escape, because there was no denying the rightness of Bridget's fury. After ten years in uniform he ought to be at least a sergeant. Instead . . .

"Good morning, Pat!" called a voice from the doorway of the Church of the Sacred Name. Pat touched the peak of his cap respectfully.

"An' the top o' the mornin' to *you,* Father."

Father O'Rourke smiled, studying the corrugated brow of his parishioner with shrewd understanding.

"You look troubled, Patrick. Anything wrong?"

"Nothin', Father. Well, that is—" Pat decided to make a clean breast of it—"nothin' much. *I'm* okay. But my Bridget, she's sort of upset about Al Flannerty."

"Ah, yes. A fine lad, Al. Won a promotion, didn't he?"

"That's just it, Father. Bridget says . . . Well, maybe she's right. I been on the Force two years longer than Al has, but here I am still a plain patrolman an' he . . . Father, what's wrong with me? Why can't *I* win a permotion?"

Father O'Rourke said soothingly, "Why worry about it, Pat? You do your duty, don't you?"

"That I do, sir. Or try to."

"And you're honest. There's not a police officer in the whole of New York City with a finer reputation."

"Which same I'm proud of, Father. But where does it get me? Other men get permoted over my head—"

"I wouldn't fret about that. Responsibility weighs heavily on a man's shoulders, Patrick, and too much authority is an awkward burden. The higher a man rises, the farther he has to fall. Why not be content to fill a humble post well?"

" 'Tis only natural—" grumbled Mulligan.

"You'll win your reward," promised the priest, "when the time is ripe. Now, run along to work, Pat. I'll drop in on your good wife this afternoon and have a bit of a chat with her. Maybe I can make her see things differently."

"Well," said Mulligan dubiously, "if you say so."

"I do. Goodbye, my boy."

"Goodbye. And . . . thanks, Father."

So with lightened heart Patrolman Patrick Mulligan moved on down the street. With happy *camaraderie* born of ten years acquaintanceship he waved to Schneider, the butcher; to Greenstein, the tailor; to Dimitropopolous, the green-grocer; to a score of other friends and neighbors.

At precisely 7:58 a.m. he opened the callbox and reported on duty. At exactly 8:00 he took his post where the car lines cross at the center of 39th Street and York Avenue. And at 8:03 . . .

At 8:03 on the dot, Patrolman Patrick Mulligan saved the life of an angel.

Now, strict ecclesiastics may contend that this is a contradiction in terms. No mere mortal, they will argue, can salvage the existence of a Being endowed, by Its very nature, with the gift of immortality.

Be that as it may. The fact remains that the angelic visitant himself acknowledged his debt to Mulligan. After he had picked himself from the gutter into which Pat's frantic thrust had elbowed him out of the path of a ten ton truck, he turned to Pat and said, "Officer, I thank you. You saved my life."

"Foosh!" said Mulligan negligently. "'Twas nothin'. I seen the truck an' you didn't."

"Nevertheless, it was a noble deed, nobly performed. Words alone cannot express my gratitude—"

"Look," said Mulligan impatiently, "if you're okay, say so. If you ain't, tell me so's I can commandeer a car to take you to the hospital for examination. Whichever, make up your mind. While we stand here finoodlin', traffic's gettin' all snarled up."

"Perhaps," said the stranger thoughtfully, "I should tell you who I am? You don't seem to understand what a great service you have this day rendered unto a Superior Being. I, Officer, am an angel."

Mulligan squinted. Mulligan stroked his chin with a leathery paw. Mulligan mused, "I guess I'd better commandeer that car, after all. Meanwhile, maybe you ought to set down an' rest a spell—"

"And as such," said the stranger, silencing him with a wave of the hand, "it lies within my power to reward you with the fulfillment of any wish you might care to make." He smiled beatifically. "Well, Officer? What would you like to have? Wealth? A glorious martyrdom? Eternal life?"

"Mister," said Mulligan flatly, "I got a job o' work to do. I got no time to bandy words with the likes o' you. So scoot along back to Bellevue before the keepers find out you're missin'. Scram, now, before I run you in."

The celestial stranger continued to smile serenely. "Tell me first your wish. What do you want more than anything else?"

"There's only one thing I want," growled Pat, "and a whacky like you can't help me get it. So, beat it!"

"Say the word, my mortal friend—"

"Awright, then!" roared Pat. "I'll tell you, if you must know. A permotion, that's what I want most. A permotion!"

"Permotion?" The stranger seemed perplexed. "Permotion? I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"A better job," elucidated Pat. "A higher rank than I got now. What's the matter, don't you talk English?"

"Oh, I see!" The other studied Mulligan seriously. "A raise in status, eh? Mmm! Well, now, this is a bit awkward. I mean, that's hardly *ever* granted while the recipient is still alive. If you'd be willing to wait twenty or thirty years—?"

"Oh, git out o' here," snorted Mulligan wearily. "I been waitin' ten years already, an' what've I got to show for it? Flat feet! I thought for a minute you was on the level, that maybe you had an in at Headquarters. But now . . . oh, beat it, will you? Get goin' before I—"

The stranger shrugged.

"Very well, Officer. A promise is a promise. A debt must be repaid. If that is what you *really* want—"

He lifted one arm, and Pat Mulligan gasped in alarm, suddenly and belatedly aware that this was no ordinary person with whom he had to deal. For in that instant the stranger's commonplace garments seemed to fade into insignificance, his visage brightened with a strange and terrible glory, and his lips framed a series of syllables unintelligible to Mulligan but awesome in their majesty.

Misgivings trembled through Pat. He cried, "Wait a minute, Mister. I was only—"

Then he fell away from his companion, dazzled by the radiance which seemed to descend from the heavens to envelope the stranger like a cloak. And from the heart of this effulgence came the words:

"Thy desire is granted, O mortal! Go in peace! But beware the Antagonist, who will surely come."

"—foolin'!" cried Pat. "I didn't know you meant—"

He stopped abruptly, his jaw falling and remaining foolishly agape. For he stood not on the curb, but back upon his traffic pedestal in the middle of the intersection. About and around him swirled the flow of early morning traffic. And the mysterious stranger was gone.

"Well!" said Patrolman Mulligan. "Well, I'll be a ring-tailed son of a —— !"

"Speaking to me, Officer?" asked a quiet voice.

Pat, spinning wildly, discovered standing beside him in the safety zone a small, dark stranger, a lean and hawk-nosed man with bright, beady eyes.

"No!" barked Pat explosively. "I was just . . . Git off this platform!"

"Sure, sure. No harm done," shrugged the dark man, and strolled away casually.

A thought struck Mulligan. He called, "Hey! Hey, you! Come back here."

The little man glided back. His black eyes glittered curiously.

"Yes? Something I can do for you, Officer?"

"Maybe. Did you see anything happen around here in the last few minutes? Anything peculiar-like?"

The lean man laughed lightly.

"*You* should know," he said and slipped away again.

This time he had disappeared into the shuttle of moving autos before Pat could call him back.

Mulligan stared after him angrily for a moment, then forgot him as his bewildered brain took up the problem of deciding what—if anything—had happened to him within the last few minutes. *Had* something really happened, or was it just a daydream? *Had* he saved the life of a man who claimed himself to be an angel, and *had* he with his own eyes watched that stranger disappear in a burst of radiance? Or was it all . . .

A voice interrupted his reverie. As he pondered, he had by force of habit been fulfilling his duties; allowing traffic to run with the line of his shoulders, barricading it with his back, whistling, waving, motioning. Now from a taxi held in throbbing abeyance a few yards away came the voice of an old acquaintance, Licensee No. 65809, Michael J. Dominick.

Mike's greeting was curiously strangled.

"H-h-halo!" he croaked. "Mulligan! H-h-halo!"

"Hello, yourself!" snapped Mulligan. "What's the matter, Mike? Asthma?"

"Y-your head! Around your . . . Aiee, Domine mio!" With a frantic moan Mike rammed in the clutch of his jaloppy, and in complete disregard of both civic ordinances and Pat's bulwarking stance streaked across the avenue against the line of traffic and out of sight.

Red anger blazed in Mulligan's law-abiding heart. He grabbed for his cap, in the lining of which reposed a book of tickets and a pencil. The idea! Who did Mike Dominick think he was, anyway? The very idea of . . .

Then something cool and tingly, like an icy electric shock, thrilled the tips of Pat's groping fingers. His hand skidded smoothly about the perimeter of a . . . a some-

thing. A hotly-cold circular something which shouldn't be, couldn't be there . . . But was.

For the first time in ten years of service, Mulligan deserted his station. With a sudden cry of alarm he charged across the street to the huge plate glass window of Shimer Brothers, staring wildly at the image of himself reflected therein . . . and howled in awestruck anguish.

Dominick had voiced no greeting. The circular thing suspended a few inches above Pat's head was a brightly gleaming halo.

Now, it might here reasonably be argued that Officer Mulligan was foolish to fly into such a tizzy. There is nothing about a halo to panic a person of good character. Haloes are benevolent, not fearsome, symbols. In their proper place, that is . . .

Nevertheless, for a moment or so Pat completely lost his head. Mulligan was an absolutely normal man, and nothing confuses a normal man more than to find himself suddenly confronted with an abnormal situation.

Fortunately there were at this hour of the morning few pedestrians on the street. And since New Yorkers have by long practice become myopic to everything save that which intimately affects themselves, Mulligan's appendage passed unnoticed by the handful who brushed by him, intent on their own affairs.

But Mulligan, to Mulligan, felt as conspicuous as an ermine stole in an Eighth Avenue ginmill. Therefore he ducked as quickly as possible into the murky sanctuary of the store before which he stood: *Shimer Brothers, Men's Wearing Apparel and Ready to Wear, Formal Attire Rented.*

"Moe!" he cried weakly. "Moe, for gosh sakes—!"

But it was not Moe Shimer who answered his call. Nor was it any of the other multitudinous Shimer Brothers, all of whom were well known to Pat. The salesman who appeared was a tall, dark man with a pointed mustache and a querulous smile.

"Yes, Officer? Is there something I can do for you?"

"Who," demanded Mulligan, "are you?"

"Permit me," smiled the clerk, and handed him a card on which was neatly engraved: *Abe Addon, Formerly associated with the Nessus Corp., Men's Custom Shirts.* "Now, sir . . . if I can be of any service—?"

"It—" said Pat hoarsely—"It's *this.*" He pointed with trembling finger to the shimmering circle hovering above his head. In the gloom of the haberdashery it dispelled an alarming amount of light. Pat waited breathlessly for Abe Addon's bleat of terror.

But the salesman's saturnine countenance never changed. "Yes, sir? You wish to get rid of it, sir?"

"I want to *cover* it," corrected Pat, "till I can get to Father O'Rourke an' find out what it means. Got a top hat handy?"

"Just . . . cover it?" repeated the clerk. He sounded a bit disappointed. "You're sure you wouldn't like to sell it? No? Ah, well—" He moved to a compartment, hobbling somewhat awkwardly. He had, Pat noticed, a clubbed foot. "A top hat. Here you are, sir. This one should fit you."

Pat removed his uniform cap and settled the silk hat firmly upon his brow. That is, he tried to. The topper was a trifle low. The imprisoned halo, barely fitting into the headpiece, had a tendency to float the hat from his forehead. But it would do.

Pat said, "This is fine. Thanks!" and shoved a bill into Addon's hands. He started for the door. But the clerk,

moving with surprising speed, intercepted him at the doorway.

"Excuse me, Officer. Your change—"

And he held out to Pat a double handful of coins. A look of amazement overspread Mulligan's face. For an instant avidity wrestled with his customary honesty. What a mistake! There must be almost fifty dollars' worth of silver . . .

What he might have done is hard to say. Nor will it ever be known. For at that moment the halo began buzzing and sparking like a hive of heated hornets. Pat blanched and broke for the door.

"Look again!" he cried. " 'Twas only a five I give you. Tell Moe I'll bring the hat back tomorrow."

And he fled up the avenue. Behind him the new clerk faded quietly back into the murky depths of the store.

Pat knew, of course, that his pellmell flight would attract attention. That was inevitable. A cop on the run is always worth a second look, and a *top-hatted* cop, even to blasé New Yorkers, is something of a novelty. Therefore it did not occur to him that he was creating even more of a madhouse than he had expected until it dawned upon him that spectators were not merely staring at him and gasping, they were running away from him and screaming.

Even in his confusion, Pat Mulligan retained sufficient logic to recognize that this was carrying matters a wee bit too far. His pace lagged, he panted for breath with which to demand an explanation. Oddly enough, as he slowed down there reached his ears something he had not noticed before. The sound of singing voices.

"Alleluja!" these bee-thin, tinkling voices chanted. *"Alleluja! Allelu—"*

Mulligan looked up. And moaned.

Circling above him like an iridescent covey of alate Borneo trophies was a swarm of gossamer-winged heads. It was this phalanx which, fluttering valiantly along with him in his flight, maintained that incessant piping chorus: *"Alleluja! Al—"*

"Stop it!" howled Mulligan.

The chanting died abruptly. Almost relievedly. One of the grisly little monstrosities mopped his forehead with a pinfeather and panted, "Well, now, that's more like it! We were beginning to wonder when we'd get a moment's rest."

"Who," demanded Pat, "are you?"

"Us?" piped another of the torsoless choristers complacently. "Why, we're cherubim, of course."

"Cheru—?"

"*Your* cherubim."

"My cheru—!"

"That's right. And Jake, over there—" The most loquacious of the genii bobbed his head—"he's your seraph." He added apologetically, "Usually they appoint two, but Jake was the only one they could spare right now. Change of seasons and all that, you know. They're short of help in the Weather Department."

"Cherubim! Seraphim!" Mulligan was glad the street was deserted. Glad, but at the same time apprehensive. That fact only served further to augment the fear growing within him. "But that means I . . . I must be dead!"

The covey fluttered fretfully, and the spokesman bit his lip.

"That's just what *we've* been wondering about. We've decided there's something highly irregular about this canonization. You've got all the rights and privileges, but you're *not* dead! Of course, it's not my place to criticize—"

The cherub shrugged. That is, Pat thought he did. It was rather difficult to judge, inasmuch as the tiny creature had no shoulders—"But I think there's something lousy in Limbo. Not that we won't serve you faithfully and to the best of our ability, St. Mulligan, but—"

"Saint!" gasped Pat. "Did you call me *Saint* Mulligan?"

"Why, yes. Of course. Didn't you know?"

"All I know," groaned Pat, "is that I want to get to Father O'Rourke as quick as possible! I wish I was there now . . . *Oooops!*" A brief giddiness assailed him; he was conscious of a sensation of flight, of movement. "Hey, what's goin' on here! What—?"

"Hello, Patrick," said a familiar voice. "This *is* a surprise. What are *you* doing here?"

Pat opened his eyes dazedly. Then clamped them shut and shook his head. Then opened them again. He stood in the private study of Father O'Rourke . . .

"So then?" asked Father O'Rourke.

"I've told ye just about all," said Pat. "The grand feenale was when I wished I was with you, and *bingo!* here I was." He stared at the priest miserably. "What am I goin' to do, Father? What is it?"

"If you were a drinking man," said the intermediary, "which I know you're not, I'd say it was alcoholic hallucinations. Which, looking at *that*—" He studied Pat's unveiled halo dubiously—"and not being a drinking man myself, I know it isn't. And you say there were cherubim, Patrick?"

"A baker's dozen of 'em," gulped Mulligan, "flittin' around me head like flies around sugar. Where they went to I don't know. But they was there."

"And a seraph?"

Pat shuddered at the memory.

"Yes, sir. Four stories high if he was an inch, an' with six wings—"

"The description," mused Father O'Rourke, "is accurate. But the circumstances—! This stranger, Patrick . . . the one whose life you saved. He called himself an angel?"

"That he did, sir. An' disappeared in a bonfire."

"Mmm-hmm. And it was immediately after he went away that you discovered the halo?"

"Yes, Father."

Father O'Rourke said, "Then I'm afraid there is only one possible explanation, my son. Incredible as it may seem, he *was* an angel . . . and he gave you your wish."

"But," moaned Mulligan, "but I didn't wish for to be made a saint, Father. All I asked for was a permotion."

"Exactly. To an angel that could mean but one thing . . . a promotion from mortal status to the hierarchy of sanctification. Patrick, my boy—" Father O'Rourke frowned sadly—"I warned you against ambition. 'Tis a bad mess you're in now. And the Church as well.

"A living Saint! The Calendar will have to be revised to include a feast day for St. Mulligan. There'll be special orders from the Diocese, and a Papal investigation—"

Pat said meekly, "I might could make it go away? The halo I mean, Father."

"Go away, Patrick?"

"There was a man," explained Pat, "offered to buy it from me. A dark man with a club foot named Abe Addon. The man, I mean; not the foot."

"Abe Addon!" cried Father O'Rourke sharply. Only he said it so fast he ran it all together. "Abaddon! Someone who called himself *that* offered you money? Pat . . . you didn't accept anything from him, did you?"

"Not me, sir! 'Twas a funny thing, though. Why Moe

Shimer should hire a new clerk who takes in a five dollar bill and tries to give back six times that much in change—"

"Pat," said the priest gravely, "you've been exposed to deadly peril. I believe you're all right, else by now the halo would be gone. But to be on the safe side I'll give you a wee sprinkle with the holy water. Wait here."

And he hurried from the room. Mulligan stared after him curiously for a moment, then shrugged, completely at sea. Nor had he time to puzzle overlong, for at that moment came a flapping sound, and in through an open window came his winged familiars, redfaced, tousle-feathered, and chanting somewhat raggedly.

"*Alleluja . . . Allelu . . .* Oh, *there* you are!" grunted the foremost dourly. "A fine trick *that* was, throwing a miracle and leaving us right there in the middle of the street. Next time you decide to vanish, let us know in advance, will you?"

"I will," promised St. Mulligan. "I'm sorry."

"Well, all right. But don't let it happen again. A cherub has *some* rights. Oh . . . *Alleluja!*" appended the cherub, almost as an afterthought. He dropped to Mulligan's shoulder and rested there, fanning himself with one wing. "Anyhow, we didn't mind much," he admitted. "We had lots of fun watching the bank robbers."

"Bank robbers?" The aureate circle still wreathed his pate, but St. Mulligan was still at heart Patrolman Patrick Mulligan.

"Yes. Down the street. You should have seen 'em, St. M. They were smoother than the highway to Hades! Snatched up everything in sight and beat it before you could say antidisestablishmentarianism! Not a mortal knows *yet* that they're driving smack down Fifth Avenue in a hearse. Imagine it . . . a *hearse!* Wouldn't that singe your pinions?"

"The Citizen's Second National," said Pat, "robbed? An' the criminals exscapin' in a hearse? Golly, if I could just—" Then a terrific idea hit him—"Hey! I *can!* What am I waitin' for?" Pat drew a deep breath. "I want to be near them bank robbers—"

Who-oo-oosh!

He was.

He was standing on the running board of a huge old-fashioned black Packard hearse which was proceeding down Fifth Avenue at the modest speed demanded by decorum. The hearse's shades were drawn . . . as were the blunt nosed automatics of the driver and his two companions on the front seat when they saw Pat. One mobster, obviously a movie fan, gasped, "Jiggers . . . the Law!"

"Pull over to the curb!" commanded Pat.

"Blast him!" howled the man in the middle. "Let him have it, then step on the gas!"

He set an example by leveling his own rod at Pat and firing at point blank range. Gouts of angry orange spat from the gun; the biting stench of cordite cut Pat's nostrils, and something like the backlash of a wayward riveting machine hit him not once or twice but a half dozen times. In the head, the arm, the wishbone, athwart the floating ribs . . .

Pat jolted from the running board to the street and bounced hard on his southern exposure. While traffic ground to a startled halt about him, he sat there, dazed and stunned, waiting for the lethal dose of lead poisoning to take effect.

Nothing happened. No pain . . . no rending paroxysms of bloody coughing . . . no visions of Aunt Nora in

a trailing white nightgown. He just sat there, his right hand toying idly with a tiny pebble . . .

Pebble?

He looked down.

The object in his hand was but one of the half dozen flattened lead pellets which lay strewn about him like incisors at a Golden Gloves tourney.

In an instant Pat was on his feet, breaking clear of the excited throng gathering about him. But the escaping crooks had gained precious time. Already the speeding hearse was out of sight. Pat groaned . . . then remembered. This time he had his own pistol in his hand when he expressed his desire. "Back!" he voiced hoarsely. "I want to be back alongside o' them again!"

Who-oo-osh! And:

"Pull over to the curb!" roared Officer Mulligan for the second time.

This time his order was obeyed. Not out of a spirit of cooperation, but because his second visitation loosed fear and panic amongst the occupants of the fleeing car. The gang leader screamed: *"Migawd, it's him again. The cop I killed!"* and fought desperately to claw his way from the enclosure *via* the thorax of his comrade-in-crime. The driver said nothing, attempted nothing. His cheeks turned the color of a mildewed diaper, his eyes rolled back in their sockets, and with quiet renunciation of all desires past and present he went to sleep over the wheel.

The limousine hit the curb, tottered, swayed, and crashed over on its side. People came running. More people came running. St. Mulligan rose from the wreckage, feeling strangely buoyant in his hour of triumph. A wild exhilaration suffused him. He felt as if he towered head and shoulders above the men rushing to his assistance.

More than head and shoulders. It seemed to Mulligan he could look down upon these simple, unsanctified mortals, seeing them as tiny, scuttling ants . . .

A voice asked, "Window cleaner, what's the commotion? What's going on down there?"

Mulligan turned irately.

"Window cleaner?" he retorted. "What do you mean, window . . . Oh, golly!"

For even as he spoke, the upturned, startled face of his questioner dwindled beneath him. He was eighteen stories high beside the Empire State Building . . . and still rising!

The flutter of wings sounded above him, and Mulligan, apprehensive of pigeons, glanced up anxiously. To his relief a familiar voice chirruped, "*Alleluja!* Nice work, boss!"

St. Mulligan demanded nervously, "Cherub, what's going on *now?* What am I doin' 'way up here?"

"Why," explained the cherub, "levitation, of course. What kind of a saint are you? Don't you know your powers?"

"I'm afeared not," confessed Pat. "I must've pushed the wrong button or somethin' in the excitement. How do I get down again?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said the cherub. "*We* have to use our wings. But since you have no wings—"

"Well, find out!" yelled Pat in desperation. "Ask Father O'Rourke. I'm passin' the thirty-third floor now. Hurry up! Get goin'!"

"*Alleluja!*" said the cherub. "You're the boss." He turned to his companions. "Flight formation. Echelon right; by the flank . . . *fly!*" They disappeared in a flurry of trilled hosannahs.

Mulligan looked up. He was rapidly nearing the peak of

Manhattan's highest structure. On the sightseers' gallery stood a lone figure. This figure cupped its hands and called to him.

"I say, there! Where are you going?"

Mulligan glowered.

"For my mornin' constitooshunal, ye dadblasted idiot! Stop askin' foolish questions an' lend a hand here! Got a piece of rope in yon tower? If so, toss it over!"

The stranger smiled. A few seconds earlier Mulligan had been a dozen stories below him, now they were almost face to face. He was a dark complexioned man of medium height with black, waxed mustache and a tiny goatee. He called, "Rope? What do you want with a rope? Just point your nose over this way and paddle with your hands . . . There, that's it. See?"

Pat said delightedly, "Why . . . why it works!"

"Of course it does. Pull in your stomach, Mulligan. Didn't you ever hear of streamlining? Now, grab my hand. In you come—" The stranger pulled and Pat paddled; in a trice Pat was standing firmly and securely on the tower platform—"How's that? Better?"

"Much better," acknowledged Pat, and studied the man curiously. "Say, haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Possibly," admitted the dark man guardedly. "I get around."

"You look something like a guy I met this mornin'. He was shorter than you, though, an' didn't have no whiskers. Chap named Addon."

The stranger shook his head.

"My name's Zeebub," he said. "B. L. Zeebub, at your service."

"An' mine—" Pat stopped, puzzled. "Say, you already know my name. You called me by it a few minutes ago."

"Of course," smiled Mr. Zeebub. "It's my business to

know the names of important personages. Particularly men with . . . well, you might say 'uncommon abilities.' My hobby is collecting unusual personalities."

"Ah," nodded Pat. "Show business?"

"You might call it that. At any rate, my reputation is based on the elaborateness of the spectacles I produce. I am proud to say that my establishment draws a far higher percentage of the public than does that of my—uh—competitor. Yes, I've had my eye on you for some time, Mulligan. Meeting you is a great pleasure."

"Sure, now," beamed Mulligan, "an' it's nice of you to say so. I might say the same, seein' as how everybody else I've met today has screamed and run like they was scared out o' their wits. It's this bein' a saint that does it, you know. What with the levitatin', an' the cherubim yodelin' like a hillbilly band, an' this halo—"

He pointed apologetically to his embarrassing disfigurement. The stranger nodded understanding.

"Ah, yes. It must be very trying, Mulligan."

"All I ast for," complained Pat, "was a permotion."

"Of course. And a perfectly normal desire, too. It is a shame. I'm sorry I didn't meet you before this accident transpired. I'm sure *I* could have got you a promotion, Pat."

"You could?"

"Without a doubt. I have many old friends in the Police Department. A word to the right party and you would be Sergeant Mulligan . . . perhaps even Lieutenant Mulligan . . . *Captain* Mulligan . . . who knows? You could even be Chief of Police."

"I could?" choked Pat raptly.

"But of course it's too late now," said the stranger regretfully. "It would hardly do for a haloed saint to be in harness blues."

Pat's house of cards collapsed. "No, I guess not," he agreed dully.

"Unless —" Mr. Zeebub stared at Mulligan speculatively —"unless you'd care to *dispose* of the halo and be a plain, everyday mortal again? In that case I might find a way of fixing things up."

"You might?" Pat beamed with joy. The fact that the halo was again sparking and buzzing like a hive of smoked bees did not disturb him. "But *can* I dispose of the halo? I don't know how."

"Why, certainly. It's very simple. All you have to do is sell it to me."

"Sell it? I'll *give* it to you!"

"No, I couldn't think of letting you do that. After all, it has a certain value. I'll give you . . . Well, let's say thirty dollars?"

"Done!" cried Pat, and glanced over his shoulder. The sound of distant singing emanated from an approaching bevy of winged faces. "They'll be su'prised, won't they, to find out I ain't their boss no more?"

"Naturally," said Mr. Zeebub smoothly, "this isn't a one-sided bargain. You must give *me* something to balance the deal."

"Anything," agreed Pat. "Name it."

The dark man smiled oddly. "I'll let you know," he said, "when the time comes for me to exact my due. But that won't be for another twenty years or so, Pat. And now your payment. Thirty silver dollars; right? Now, the halo—"

"Here—" said Pat. He reached for it. And gasped. And swished his hand back and forth above his head for a hoop which was not there. And turned to Mr. Zeebub in alarm. "It ain't there! It's—"

He stopped abruptly. Mr. Zeebub, too, was gone.

"Alleluja!" piped the cherubim. *"Alleluja!* Here we are, boss. We got it."

Mulligan glared at them petulantly.

"Got what?"

"From Father O'Rourke. It will stop you levitating. Here—" The cherub spokesman tilted a tiny phial, allowed a few colorless drops to trickle upon Mulligan.

"Ao-o-oow!" howled Mulligan. "Get that stuff out of here. What's the idea o' pourin' carbolic acid on me?"

"Alleluja!" chanted the cherub. *"Allel* . . . What did you say? Carbolic—?"

"You heard me. It ain't funny, pourin' red-hot acid all over a guy!"

The cherub's smile faded abruptly. He glanced at his hushed companions. And in a troubled tone, "Let's go," he said. "We'd better get out of here!"

And away they whisked.

But even as Mulligan watched them disappear skyward there came the scuff of many footsteps, the sound of many excited voices. The tower door opened and Pat was engulfed by a tide of admirers. Civilians were there, and men in blue uniforms. Hands fought to shake that of Pat; other hands pounded his shoulders enthusiastically. A voice with authority boomed loud congratulations.

"—a fine exhibition of loyalty and courage," cried this voice, "which will not go unrewarded. For capturing a desperate band of criminals singlehanded you, Patrolman Mulligan, are hereby promoted to the rank of full lieutenant. And I venture to predict, sir, that this is but the beginning of a long and successful career—"

Lieutenant! Lieutenant Mulligan!

Pat's brain whirled. As in a dream he found himself accepting the praise of his peers. He was scarcely able to bid his visitors farewell, hardly aware they were leaving,

until at last he stood alone again, overflowing with joy, upon the pinnacle of the Empire State Building. On the peak of Earth's highest manmade mountain, overlooking the world.

The world at his feet!

And Bridget?

Pat Mulligan, saint no longer, but a lieutenant with a great and glorious future before him, laughed aloud. There was pride in his laughter. Pride and vanity and confidence. He had no need now of Mr. Zeebub's aid. He had won success on his own merit. Never again could Bridget rail at him, deride him.

He rocked with carefree laughter, and a lock of hair tumbled before his eyes. He raised one hand to brush it back in place . . .

—And faltered, his laughter dying on a note of sudden panic. The base of his spine tingled, and a writhing *something* brushed coldly against his legs. As his right hand fingered his forehead, his other hand groped behind him. And in that moment, Patrick Mulligan belatedly and terribly knew not only the price he must pay for success, but the true name of his benefactor.

For what he felt was:

Horns!

Horns . . . and the stump of a tail!

THE MONSTER FROM NOWHERE

Enough to think such things may be:
To say they are not or they are
Were folly . . .

ONE nice thing about the Press Club is that you can get into almost any kind of wrangle you want. This night we were talking about things unusual. Jamieson of the *Dispatch* mentioned some crackpot he had heard of who thought he could walk through glass. Snipe Andrews of the *Morning Call* had a wild yarn about the black soul of Rhoderick Dhu, whom Nova Scotians claim still walks the moors near Antigonish. Then a guy named Joe brought up the subject of Ambrose Bierce's invisible beast.

You remember the story? About the diarist who was haunted and pursued by a gigantic thing which couldn't be seen? And who was finally devoured by it?

Well, we chewed the fat about that one for a while and Jamieson said the whole thing was fantastic; that total invisibility was impossible. The guy named Joe said Bierce was right; that several things *could* cause invisibility. A complete absence of light for one thing, he said. Or curvature of light waves. Or coloration in a wavelength beyond that of the human eye's visual scope.

Snipe Andrews said, "Nuts!" Winky Peters, who was getting a little tight, hiccoughed something to the effect that "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy—" and then got in a hell of a fuss with the bartender who said his name *wasn't* Horatio.

I said nothing, because I didn't know. Maybe that's the reason why this stranger, a few minutes later, moved over beside me and opened a conversation.

"You're Hawley, aren't you?" he asked.

"That's me," I agreed. "Len Hawley—chief errand boy and dirt scratcher-upper for the *Daily Blade*. You've got me, though, pal. Who are *you?*"

He smiled and said, "Let's go over in that corner, shall we? It's quieter over there."

That made it sound like a touch, but I liked something about this guy. Maybe it was his face. I like tough faces; the real McCoy, tanned by Old Sol instead of sunlamp rays. Maybe it was the straightness of his back, maybe the set of his shoulders. Or it could have been just the way he spoke. I don't know.

Anyway, I said, "Sure," and we moved to the corner table. He ordered and I ordered, and we just sat there for a moment, staring at each other. Finally he said, "Hawley, your memory isn't so good. We've met before."

"I meet 'em all," I told him. "Sometimes they're driving Black Marias, and sometimes they're in 'em. Mostly they're lying in the morgue, with a pretty white card tied to their big toe. Or, maybe . . . Hey!" I said, "You're not Ki Patterson who used to write for the Cincinnati *News?*"

He grinned then.

"No, but you're close. I'm Ki Patterson's brother, Burch."

"Burch Patterson!" I gasped. "But, hell . . . you're not going to get away with this." I climbed to my feet and started to shout to the fellows. "Hey, gang—"

"Don't, Len!" Patterson's voice was unexpectedly sharp. There was a note of anxiety in it, too. He grabbed my arm and pulled me back into my seat. "I have very good

reasons for not wanting anyone to know I'm back . . . yet."

I said, "But, hell, Burch, you can't treat a bunch of newspapermen like this. These guys are your friends."

Now that he had told me who he was, I could recognize him. But the last time I had seen him the only time I had ever met him, in fact—he had been dressed in khaki shirt and corduroy breeches, and worn an aviator's helmet. No wonder I hadn't known him in civies.

I remembered that night, two years ago, when he and his expedition had taken off from Roosevelt Field for their exploration trip to the Maratan Plateau in upper Peru. The primary purpose of the trip had been scientific research. The Maratan Plateau, as you undoubtedly know, is one of the many South American spots as yet unexplored. It was Burch Patterson's plan to study the region, incidentally paying expenses *à la* Frank Buck by "bringing back alive" whatever rare beasts city zoos would shell out for.

For a few weeks the expedition had maintained its contact with the civilized world. Then, abruptly . . . silence! A month . . . two months . . . passed. No word or sign from the explorers. The United States government sent notes to the Peruvian solons. Peru replied in smooth, diplomatic terms that intimated Uncle Sam might a damn sight better keep his wingding adventurers in his own backyard. A publicity-seeking aviatrix ballyhooed funds for a "relief flight" . . . but was forbidden the attempt when it was discovered she had already promised three different companies to endorse their gasoline.

The plight of the lost expedition was a nine-days' wonder. Then undeclared wars grabbed page one. And the National Air Registry scratched a thin blue line through

the number of pilot Burchard Patterson and wrote after his name, *"Lost."*

But now, here before me in the flesh, not lost at all but very much alive, was Burch Patterson.

I had so many questions to ask him that I began babbling like a greenhorn legman on his first assignment.

"When did you get back?" I fired at him. "Where's your crew? What happened? Did you reach the Plateau? And does anyone know you're—?"

He said, "Easy, Len. All in good time. I haven't told anyone I'm back yet for a very good reason. *Very* good! As for my men—" He stared at me somberly—"They're dead, Len. All of them. Toland . . . Fletcher . . . Gainelle . . ."

I was quiet for a moment. The way he repeated the names was like the tolling of a church bell. Then I began thinking what a wow of a story this was. I could almost see my name bylining the yarn. I wanted to know the rest so bad I could taste it.

I said, "I'm sorry, Burch. Terribly sorry. But, tell me, what made you come here tonight? And why all the secrecy?"

"I came here tonight," he said, "searching for someone I could trust. I hoped no one would remember my face . . . for it *is* changed, you know. I have something to tell so great, so stupendous, that I hardly know how to present it to the world. Or even . . . if I should.

"I liked the way you kept out of that silly argument a few minutes ago—" He motioned to the bar, where a new wrangle was now in progress—"because you obviously had an open mind on the subject. I think you are the man whose help and advice I need."

I said, "Well, that's sure nice of you, Patterson. But I

think you overrate me. I kept my yap shut just because I'm kind of dumb about scientific things. Ask me how many words to a column inch, or how many gangsters got knocked off in the last racket war, but—"

"You're the man I'm looking for. I don't want a man with a scientific mind. I need a man with good, sound common sense." He looked at his wrist watch. "Len, will you come out to my home with me?"

"When?"

"Now."

I said, "Jeepers, Burch, I've got to get up at seven tomorrow. I really shouldn't—"

He leaned over the table, stared at me intently. "Don't stall, Len. This is important. Will you?"

I told you I was snoopy. I stood up.

"My hat's in the cloak-room," I said. "Let's go."

Patterson's estate was in North Jersey. A rambling sort of place, some miles off the highway. It was easy to see how he could come home to it, open it up, and still not let anyone know he had returned. As we drove, he cleared up a few foggy points for me.

"I didn't return to the States on a regular liner. I had reasons for not doing so; reasons which you will understand in a short time.

"I charted a freighter, a junky little job, from an obscure Peruvian port. Pledged the captain to secrecy. He landed me and my . . . my cargo—" He stumbled on the word for a moment—"at a spot which I'm not at liberty to reveal. Then I came out here and opened up the house.

"That was just two days ago. I wired my brother, Ki, to come immediately. But he—"

"He's working in L. A.," I said.

"Yes. The soonest he could get here would be tonight.

He may be at the house when we arrive. I hope so. I'd like to have two witnesses of that which I am going to show you."

He frowned. "Maybe I'm making a mistake, Len. It's the damnedest thing you ever heard of. Maybe I ought to call in some professor, too. But . . . I don't know. It's so utterly beyond credibility, I'd like you and Ki to advise me first."

I said, "Well, what the hell is it, Burch?" Then I suddenly remembered a motion picture I'd seen some years ago, a movie based on a story by H. G. Wells. "It's not a . . . a monster, is it?" I asked. "Some beast left over from prehistoric ages?"

"No, not exactly. At least, I can assure you of *this* . . . it is not a fossil, either living or dead. It's a thing entirely beyond man's wildest imaginings."

I leaned back and groaned. "I feel like a kid," I told him, "on Christmas eve. Step on it, guy."

There were lights in the house when we got there. As Burch had hoped, Ki Patterson had arrived from California. He heard us pull up the gravel lane and came to the door. There was a reunion scene, one of those back-clapping, how-are-you-old-fellow things. Then we went in.

"I found your note," Ki said, "and knew you'd be right back. I needn't tell you I'm tickled to death you're safe, Burch. But why all the secrecy?"

"That's what I asked him," I said. "But he's not giving out."

"It's something," Ki accused, "about the old workshop behind the house. I know that. I was snooping around back there and—"

Burch Patterson's face whitened. He clutched his brother's arm.

"You didn't go inside?"

"No. The place was locked. Say—" Ki stared at his brother curiously—"are you feeling okay, Burch? Are you sure you're not—"

"You must be careful," said Burch Patterson. "You must be very, very careful when you approach that shed. I am going to take you out there now. But you must stand exactly where I tell you to, and make no sudden moves."

He strode to a library table, took out three automatics. One he tucked into his own pocket; the others he handed to us. "I'm not sure," he said, "that these would be any good if . . . if anything happened. But it is the only protection we have. You *might* be lucky enough to hit a vulnerable spot."

"A vulnerable spot?" I said. "Then it *is* a beast?"

"Come," he said. "I shall show you."

He led the way to the workshop. It lay some yards behind and beyond the house, a big, lonesome sort of place, not quite as large as a barn, but plenty big. My first idea was that at some time it must have been used as a barn, for as we approached it I could catch that animal odor you associate with barns, stables, zoos. Only more so. It was a nasty, fetid, particularly offensive odor. You know how animals smell worse when they get excited? Or when they've been exercising a lot? Well, the place smelled like that.

I was nervous, and when I get nervous I invariably try to be funny. I said, "If they're horses you ought to curry them more often."

I saw a faint blur in the black before me. It was Ki's face. He said, "Not horses, Len. We've never kept horses on this estate."

Then we were at the door of the shed, and Burch was fumbling with a lock. I heard metal click, then the door

creaking open. Patterson touched a switch. The sudden blaze of light made me blink.

"In here," said Burch. And warningly, "Stay close behind me!"

We crowded in. First Burch, then Ki, then me. As Ki passed through the door I felt his body stiffen, heard him gasp hoarsely. I peered over his shoulder—

—Then I, too, gasped.

The thing I saw was incredible. There were two uprights of steel, each about four inches in diameter, deeply imbedded in a solid steel plate which was secured to a massive concrete block. Each of these uprights was pierced, and through the eyelets ran a third steel rod which had been hammered down so that the horizontal bar was held firmly in place by the two uprights.

And on this horizontal rod was . . . a thing!

That is all I can call it. It had substance but it had no form. Or, to be more accurate, it had every form of which you can conceive. For like a huge black amoeba, or like a writhing chunk of amorphous matter, it changed.

Where the steel rod pierced this blob of thing was a clotted, brownish excrescence. This, I think, accounted for some of the animal odor. But not all of it. The whole shop was permeated with the musty scent.

The thing changed! As I watched, there seemed to be at one time a globular piece of matter twisting on the rod, an instant later the globe had turned into a triangle . . . then into something remotely resembling a cube.

It was constantly in motion, constantly in flux. But here is the curious part. It did not change shape slowly, as an amoeba, so that you could watch the sphere turn into an oblong, the oblong writhe into a formless blob of flesh. It made these changes instantaneously.

Ki Patterson cried, "Good God, Burch, what unholy

thing is this?" and took a step forward past his brother's shoulder.

Burch shouted, "Back, you idiot!" and yanked at Ki's arm. Ki moved just in time. For as he quitted the spot to which he had advanced there appeared in the air right over that spot another mass of the same black stuff that was captured on the bar. A blob of shapeless, stinking matter that gaped like a huge mouth, then closed convulsively where Ki had stood a moment before.

And now the fragment on the rod was *really* moving. It changed shape so rapidly, twisted and wriggled with such determination, that there was no doubt whatsoever about the sentience governing it. And other similar blobs suddenly sprang into sight. A black pyramid struck the far wall of the shed, and trembling woodwork told that here was solid matter. An ebon sphere rose from nowhere to roll across the floor, stopping just short of us. Most weirdly of all, a shaft of black jolted down through the floor . . . and failed to break the flooring!

That's about all I remember of that visit, for Ki suddenly loosed a terrified yelp, turned and scrambled past me to the door. I take no medals for courage. He was four steps ahead of me at the portal, but I beat him to the house by a cool ten yards. Burch was the only calm one. He took time to lock the workshed door, then followed us.

But don't get the idea he was exactly calm, either. His face wasn't white, like Ki's, nor did his hand shake on the whisky-and-splash glass, like mine. But there was real fear in his eyes. *Real* fear, I mean.

The whisky was a big help. It brought my voice back. "Well, Burch," I said. "We've seen it. Now, what in hell did we see?"

"You have seen," said Burch Patterson soberly, "the thing that killed Toland and Fletcher and Gainelle."

"We found it," said Burch, "on the Maratan Plateau. For we did get there, you know. Yes. Even though our radio went bad on us just after we left Quiche, and we lost contact with the world. For a while we considered going into Lima for repairs, but Fletcher thought he could fix it once we were on solid ground, so we let it ride.

"We found a good, natural landing field on the Plateau and began our investigations." He brooded silently for a minute. Then, reluctantly, "The Maratan is even richer in paleontological data than men have dared hope. But man must never try to go there again. Not until his knowledge is greater than it is today."

Ki said, "Why? That *thing* outside?"

"Yes. It is the gateway for that . . . and others like it.

"Some day I may tell you all about the marvels we saw on the Plateau. But now my story concerns only one: the one you have seen.

"Fletcher saw it first. We had left Gainelle tending camp and were making a field survey when we saw a bare patch in the jungle which surrounded our landing field. Fletcher trained his glasses on the spot, and before he even had time to adjust them properly he was crying, 'There's something funny over there. Take a look!'

"We all looked. And we saw . . . what you saw a few minutes ago. Huge, amorphous blobs of jet black which seemed to be of the earth, yet not quite of it. Sometimes these ever-changing fragments were suspended in air with no visible support. At other times they seemed to rest naturally enough on solid ground. But ever and ever again . . . they changed!

"Afire with curiosity, we went to the open spot. It was a mistake."

"A mistake?" I repeated.

"Yes. Fletcher lost his life . . . killed by his own curi-

osity. I need not tell you how he died. It was, you must believe me, horrible. Out of nowhere one of the jet blobs appeared before him. Then around him. Then he was gone."

"Gone?" exclaimed Ki. "You mean dead?"

"I mean gone. One second he was there; the next, both he and the *thing* which had snatched him had disappeared into thin air.

"Toland and I fled, panic stricken, back to camp. We told Gainelle what we had seen. Gainelle, a crack shot and a gallant sportsman, was incredulous; perhaps even doubtful of our sanity. At his insistence we armed and returned to the tiny glade.

"This time it was as if the *thing* expected us, for it did not await our attack. It attacked us. We had barely entered its domain when suddenly, all about us, were clots of this ever-changing black. I remember hearing Toland scream, high and thin, like a woman. I dimly recall hearing the booming cough of Gainelle's express rifle, and of firing myself. I remember thinking subconsciously that Gainelle was a crack shot. That he never missed anything he aimed at. But it didn't seem to matter. If you hit one of those fleshy blobs it bled a trifle . . . maybe. More likely than not it changed shape or disappeared entirely.

"It was a rout. We left Toland behind us on the plain, dead. A black triangular *thing* had slashed Gainelle from breast to groin. I managed to drag him half way out of the glade before he died in my arms. Then I was alone.

"I am not a good pilot under best conditions. Now I was frantic, crazed with fear. Somehow I managed to reach the 'plane. But in attempting to take off I cracked up. I must bear a charmed life. I was not injured myself, but the 'plane was ruined. My expedition, hardly started, was already at an end."

I was beginning to understand, now, why Burch Patterson had not wanted the world to know of his return. A tale as wild and fantastic as this would lead him to but one spot . . . the psychopathic ward. Had I not seen the *thing* there in the shed I would never have believed him myself. But as it was . . .

"And then?" I asked.

"I think there is a madness," said Burch, "which is braver than bravery. I think that form of insanity seized me then. All I could comprehend was that some *thing*, a *thing* that changed its shape, had killed my companions.

"I determined to capture that *thing* or die in the attempt. But first I had to sit down and figure out what it was."

Ki licked his lips. "And . . . and did you figure it out, Burch?"

"I think so. But the result of my reasoning is as fantastic as the *thing* itself. That is why I want the help and advice of you two. I will tell you what I think. Then you must say what is best to do."

I poured another drink all around. It wasn't my house or my liquor, but nobody seemed to mind. Ki and I waited for Burch to resume. Burch had picked up, and was now handling with a curiously abstracted air, a sheet of notepaper. As he began, he waved this before us.

"Can you conceive," he asked, "of a world of only two dimensions? A world which scientists might call 'Flatland'? A world constructed like this piece of paper . . . on which might live creatures who could not even visualize a third dimension of depth?"

"Sure," said Ki. I wasn't so sure myself, but I said nothing.

"Very well. Look—" Burch busied himself with a pencil for an instant. "I draw on this sheet of paper a tiny man.

He is a Flatlander. He can move forward or backward, up or down, but he can never move *out* of his world into the third dimension because he has no knowledge of a dimension rectangular to that in which he lives. He does not even dream of its existence."

I said, "I see what you mean. But what has that to do with—?"

"Wait, Len." Patterson suddenly struck the paper a blow with one finger, piercing it. He held the sheet up for our inspection. "Look at this. What do you see?"

"A sheet of paper," I said, "with a hole in it."

"Yes. But what does the *Flatlander* see?"

Ki looked excited. "I get it, Burch! He sees an unexpected, solid object appear before him . . . out of nowhere! If he walks around this object he discovers it to be crudely round."

"Exactly. Now if I push my finger farther through the hole—"

"The object expands."

"And if I bend it?"

"It changes its shape."

"And if I thrust another finger through Flatland—?"

"Another strangely shaped piece of solid matter materializes before the Flatlander!" Ki's eyes were widening by the moment. I didn't understand why. I said, "I told you I didn't have a scientific mind, Burch. What does all this mean?"

Burch said patiently, "I have merely been establishing a thought-pattern, Len, so you can grasp the next step of my reasoning. Forget the Flatlander now. Or, rather, try to think of us as being in his place.

"Would we not, to a creature whose natural habitat is a higher plane than ours, appear much the same sort of projection as the Flatlander is to us? Suppose a creature of

this higher plane projected a portion of himself into our dimension as I projected my finger into Flatland. We would not be able to see all of him, just as the Flatlander could not see all of us. We would see only a tridimensional cross-section of him, as the Flatlander saw a bidimensional cross-section of us."

This time I got it. I gasped.

"Then you think that thing in the workshed is a cross-section of a creature from the—"

"Yes, Len. From the fourth dimension."

Patterson smiled wanly.

"That is the decision I reached on the Maratan Plateau. There confronted me the problem of capturing the thing. The answer eluded me for weeks. Finally I found it."

"It was—?" Ki was leaning forward breathlessly.

"The Flatlander," said Burch, "could not capture my finger, *ever*, by lassooing it. No matter how tight he drew his noose I could always withdraw my finger.

"But he *could* secure a portion of me by fastening me to his dimension. Thus—" He showed us how a pin laid flat in Flatland could pierce a small piece of skin. "Now, if this pin were bolted securely the finger thus prisoned could not be withdrawn.

"That was the principle on which I worked. But my task had just begun. It took months to effect the capture. I had to study from afar the amorphous black *thing* which was my quarry; try to form some concept of what incredible fourth dimensional beast would cast projections of that nature into the third.

"Finally I decided that one certain piece of black matter, occurring in a certain relationship to the changing whole, was a foot. How, it is not important to tell. It was, after all, theory coupled with guesswork.

"I constructed the shackle you have seen. Two uprights

with a third that must pierce the *thing,* then lock upon it. I waited, then, many weeks. Finally there came a chance to spring my trap. And . . . it worked."

Ki asked, "And then?"

"The rest is a long and wearisome story. Somehow I found my way to a native village, there employed natives to drag my captive from the Plateau. We were handicapped by the fact that we could never get too near the trap. You see, it is a *limb* we have imprisoned. The head, with its eating apparatus or whatever it is, is still free. That is what tried to reach you, Ki, there in the shed.

"Anyway, we made an arduous trek to the coast. As I have told you, I chartered a vessel. The sailors hated and feared my cargo. The trip was not an easy one. But I was determined, and my determination bore fruit. So . . . here we are."

I said, "Yeah . . . here we are. Just like the man who grabbed a tiger by the tail, then couldn't let go. Now that you've got this *thing,* what are you going to do with it?"

"That's what I want *you* to tell *me.*"

Ki's eyes were glowing. He said, "Good Lord, man, is there any question in your mind? Call in the scientists . . . the whole damned brigade of them. Show them this thing. You've got the marvel of the age on your hands!"

"And you, Len?"

"You want it straight?" I said. "Or do you want me to pull my punches?"

"Straight. That's why I asked you out here."

"Then get rid of it," I said. "Kill it. Set it on fire. Destroy it. I don't know just how you're going to do it, but I do know that's the thing to do.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking, Ki . . . so shut up! I'm a dope. Sure. I'm ignorant. Sure. I don't have the mind or the heart of a true scientist. Okay, you're right. But

Burch said I had common sense . . . and I'm exercising it now. I say get rid of that damned thing before something happens. Something horrible that you will regret for the rest of your life."

Ki looked a little peeved. He said, "You're nuts, Len. The thing's tied down, isn't it? Damn it, man, you're the kind of guy who holds back the progress of the world. If you'd been alive in his day, you'd have voted to kill Galileo."

"If he'd trapped a monster like this," I retorted, "a monster that had already killed at least three men, I'd have voted just that way. I'm not superstitious, Burch. But I'm afraid. I'm afraid that when man starts monkeying with the unknown he gets beyond his depth. I say . . . kill it now!"

Burch looked at me anxiously.

"That's your last word, Len?"

"Absolutely my last," I said. I rose. "And to prove it, I'm going home now. I'm not going to write a damned word about what I've seen tonight. I don't care if this is the best story since the deluge, I'm not going to write it!"

Ki said, "You give me a pain in the neck, Len."

"Same to you," I told him, "only farther south. Goodnight, gents." And I left.

I kept my word. Though I had the mimsies all night, tossing and dreaming about that weird, changing black *thing*, I didn't put a word concerning it on paper. I half expected to hear from Burch Patterson some time during the next day. But I didn't. The following morning I saw why. The *Call* carried a front page blast, screaming to the astonished world the news that, "the missing explorer, Burch Patterson, has returned home," and that tonight there would be "a convocation of eminent scientists" at

his home "to view some marvel brought back from the wilds of upper Peru."

All of which meant that brother Ki's arguments had proven more persuasive than mine. And that tonight there was to be a preview of that damned *thing*.

I was pretty sore about it. I thought the least they could have done was give *me* the news beat on the yarn. But there was no use crying over spilt milk. Anyway, I remembered that Ki's paper had a tie-up with the *Call*. It was only natural he should route the story that way.

Then I went down to the office, and Foster, the human buzzsaw who is our City Editor, waggled me to his desk.

"Hawley," he said, "I'm going to give you a chance to earn some of that forty per we're overpaying you. I want you to represent us tonight out at Patterson's home in Jersey. He's going to unveil something mysterious."

I said, "Who, me? Listen, chief, give it to Bill Reynolds, won't you? I've got some rewrites to do."

"What's the matter? New Jersey give you asthma?"

"Chief," I pleaded, "I can't cover this. I don't know anything about science or—"

"What do you mean . . . science?" Foster glared at me. "Do you know what this is all about?"

That stopped me. I didn't want the assignment, but if I ever admitted that I'd known about Patterson's changeable what-is-it and not beaten the *Call* to the streets with the story I would be scanning the want ads in fifteen seconds flat. So I gulped and said, "Okay, boss. I'll go."

Everybody and his brother was there that night. I recognized a professor of physics from Columbia, and the padwar of paleontology from N. Y. U. Two graybeards from the Academy of Natural History were in a corner discussing something that ended in -zoic, and the curator

of the Museum was present, looking only slightly less musty than one of his mummies.

The press was out in force. All the bureaus and most of the New York papers had representatives there. Ki was doing the receiving. Burch had not yet shown up. I got Ki aside and told him what a skunky trick I thought he'd pulled on me, but he merely shrugged.

"I'm sorry, Len. But you had your chance. After all, I had to think of my own paper first." Then he grinned. "Anyway, you were in favor of destroying the *thing*."

"I still am," I told him dourly.

"Then why are you here?"

It was my turn to shrug. "It was either come or lose my job," I said. "What would you do?"

Then Burch put in an appearance, and the whole outfit went genteelly crazy. Flashbulbs started blazing, and all my learned confreres of the Fourth Estate started shooting questions at him. About his trip, the loss of his comrades, his experiences. I knew all that stuff, so I just waited for the big blow-off to follow.

It came at last. The moment when Burch said, "Before I tell my entire story I prefer that you see that which I brought back with me." And he led the way out to the workshop.

Ki and Burch had fixed up the place a little. They had drawn chalk lines on the floor to show the visitors where they might stand.

"And I warn you," said Burch, just before he opened the shed door, "not to move beyond those lines. Later you will understand why."

The crowd began to file in. From my post in the rear I could tell when the first pair of eyes sighted that *thing* . . . and when every subsequent visitor saw it, as well. Gasps, exclamations, and little cries of astonishment rip-

pled through the crowd as one by one they moved into the room.

The *thing* was still suspended on its imprisoning rod. As before, it was wriggling and moving, changing its shape with such rapidity that the human eye could scarcely view one shape before that turned into another. In view of what Burch had told me I could comprehend the *thing* better now. I could understand how, if that black blob of flesh captured by the bar were really—as Burch presumed—the leg of some ultra-dimensional monster, the movements of that limb, as it sought to break free, would throw continually changing projections into our world.

I could understand, too, why from time to time we would see *other* bits of solid matter appear in various sections of the room. Though these seemed disassociated with the chunk pinned on the bar, I knew them to be actually separate portions of the same beast. For if a man were to thrust four fingers simultaneously into Flatland, to the Flatlander these would appear to be four separate objects, while in reality they were part of a single unit in a dimension beyond his powers of conception.

The amazement of the savants was something to behold. I began to feel a little ashamed of myself. Perhaps I had been wrong to give Burch the advice I had. Perhaps, as Ki had said, this was one of the greatest discoveries of all time.

One of the photographers was dropping to his knee, leveling his camera at the shifting *thing* on the rod. I caught myself thinking swiftly, *"He shouldn't do that!"* Evidently Burch had the same idea. He took a swift step forward, cried, "Please! I would rather you didn't—"

He spoke too late. The man's finger pressed. For an instant the room was flooded with light . . .

—And then it happened. I heard a thin scream that

came from far away. Or it may not have been a sound at all in the true sense of that word. It may have been some tonic wave of supernatural heights, for it tortured the eardrums to hear it.

The thing on the rod churned into motion. Violent motion. It grew and dwindled, shifted from cube to hemisphere, back to cube again. Then a truncated pyramidal form was throbbing, jerking, churning on the steel. Where once I had seen an old, ugly, healed wound, ichor-clotted, now I saw ragged edges of black break open; saw fresh gouts of brownish fluid well from raw edges in that changing black.

Burch's horrified voice rose above the tumult.

"Out! Get out, all of you, before it—"

That was all he found time to say. For there came a horrible, sucking sound, like the sound of gangrenous flesh tearing away, and where there had been a changing black shape swirling on an imprisoning steel rod, suddenly there was nothing.

And with equal suddenness several of the shapeless blobs of matter from various parts of the room seemed to rush together with frightful speed. Someone screaming with terror bumped against me. I fell to my hands and knees in the doorway, feeling the flood of human terror swarm over me.

But not until I had seen a scimitar-shaped blob of black flesh reach out to strike at Ki Patterson. Ki had not even time to cry out. He went down as though stricken by the sickle of Chronos.

I cried, "Burch!"

Burch had turned to face the coalescing monster. A revolver in his hand was filling the room with thunder. Orange gouts of flame belched from its muzzle, and I knew he was not missing. Still the thing was closing in on him.

I saw what appeared to be four jet circles appear in a ring over the head of Burch Patterson. Saw the circles expand and a wider expanse of black, flat and sinister, appear directly over his head. They came together with a clutching, enveloping movement. Then he was gone.

Somehow I managed to struggle out of that shed. Not that it made any difference. For with the disappearance of Burch Patterson, the *thing* itself disappeared.

I won't try to describe the terrified group of newsmen and scientists who gathered at the Patterson house. Who trembled and quaked and offered frenetic explanations for that which had transpired. Who finally summoned up courage enough to return to the shed cautiously, seeking the mortal remains of Burch Patterson.

They found nothing of course. Ki was there, but Ki was dead. Burch was gone. The air was still putrid with that unearthly animal stench. Beneath the steel trap Patterson had built for his *thing* was a pool of drying brownish fluid. One of the scientists wanted to take a sample of this for analysis. He returned to the house for a container in which to put it.

Maybe it was the wrong thing for me to do. But I thought, then, that it was best. And I still think so. If he had taken that sample, made that analysis, sooner or later another expedition would have set out for the Maratan Plateau in search of that *thing* whose blood did not correspond to that of any known animal. I didn't believe this should happen. So while he was gone I set fire to the shed. It was an old place, dry as tinder. By the time he returned it was a seething cauldron of flame. It made a fitting pyre for the body of Ki Patterson.

But I don't know. I have wondered often, since. Somehow I have a feeling that Burch Patterson may not be

dead, after all. That is, if a human can live in a dimension of which he cannot conceive.

The more I think of it, the more I try to reconcile that which I saw with that which Burch told me, the more I believe that the thing which descended upon Burch there in the shed was not a mouth . . . but a gigantic paw. I saw four circles appear, you know. Four circles with a flat black spot above. It could have been four huge fingers and a palm descending to grasp the daring tridimensional "Flatlander" who had the audacity to match wits with a creature from a superior world. If that be so . . . and if the *thing* were intelligent . . . Patterson might be alive . . .

I don't know. But sometimes I am tempted to organize another expedition to the Maratan Plateau, myself. I'd like to learn the truth concerning the *thing* from beyond the gateway. The truth concerning Burch Patterson's fate.

What would *you* do?

V

The Man Who Walked Through Glass

The Enchanted Pencil

Pilgrimage

THE MAN WHO WALKED THROUGH GLASS

The wondrous World of Glass, wherein inisled
All long'd–for things their beings did repeat.

IT WAS the damnedest thing. We had been chatting more or less casually about the weather and the Yankees' chances and the political situation when suddenly this chap Guimple leaned forward and said earnestly, "Look, I want to show you something."

"Something?" I repeated. A little stupidly, I imagine. Guthrie Guimple was not the sort of person of whom you would expect parlor tricks. He looked, now that I think of it, very much like the "average male American" you read about. Medium height and weight. Brownish hair and eyes. Mildish manner. He was the kind of man who sits beside you in the movies or shares your Pullman compartment. Our meeting at this private New York club had been purely accidental. As a visitor entering on a guest card I had been bored and restive and had welcomed a drinking companion.

"Something odd," he said. "Look!"

He drained the few drops of beer remaining in the bottom of his glass and carefully stripped a gold signet ring from the third finger of his right hand. Then effortlessly —almost casually—he moved his hand directly *through* the empty glass!

I stared at him.

"Now, wait a minute," I said. "Three beers don't ordinarily make me see things, but—"

"You're not seeing things," he assured me solemnly. "I really *can* do it. See?"

Once more he moved his bared hand across and into the beer glass. This time he halted its motion halfway through the thing, let it rest there. You could see the sharp arc where the glass cut twice through his flesh, see the odd twist in his hand inside the glass barrier. Double refraction, I think it's called. I reached out and touched his hand; touched the glass, as well. My fingers followed his cool, somewhat moist flesh as far as the glass . . . then stopped abruptly as they reached the container. I withdrew my hand quickly.

"I don't understand," I said. "What is it? What do you do?"

Slowly he returned the ring to his finger.

"I don't know," he confessed, a touch of pique in his voice. "It just began happening the other day. I haven't been able to figure it out myself."

"But, Guimple," I declared, "it's impossible! A man can't *do* things like that."

"*I* can," he said simply. He reached out again to the glass. This time his hand stopped normally as it met the container. He smiled at me a bit wistfully. "You see? The minute I put the ring on it won't work. Any foreign substance seems to act as a barrier."

"What does it feel like?" I asked.

He hesitated momentarily.

"Well . . . nothing much. There's no sensation except . . . no sensation to speak of. It's just as if you were putting your hand into water. Ice-water, perhaps."

"It doesn't hurt?"

"Not a bit. On the contrary—" He stopped and regarded

me strangely. "It . . . it isn't just my hand, you know. It's all of me."

"You mean your whole body?"

"Yes." He blushed faintly. "Of course I have to take my clothes off."

"Oh, of course," I said. My initial surprise had faded now, and I was beginning to realize that in some fashion or other I had been neatly gulled. I was a trifle angry with this fellow Guimple. I don't care much for practical jokes, anyway, and I thought it an imposition for him to play one on a casual acquaintance. I rose from the table a bit huffily.

"If you don't mind," I said, "I'll run along now. One show a night is enough for me."

He jumped up hastily, a concerned look in his eyes.

"You're not angry, are you?"

"Angry? Why should I be angry?"

"But you *are!*" he wailed. "Everyone is. Nobody will believe it's not just a trick. Even the doctor I went to ordered me out of his office. But I *must* show it to someone! It has me worried. It's unnatural . . . and I don't know what to do about it. Look . . . give me a chance to convince you that it's real? Won't you come to my apartment some time tomorrow and let me show you? Maybe you can help me figure out why . . . why . . ."

There was unfeigned eagerness in his tone. My curiosity was, after all, deeper than my anger. I nodded.

"Very well, then," I told him. "How about tomorrow afternoon?"

"Oh, I wish you would!" He scribbled an address on his card and pressed it into my hand. "About three o'clock?"

"At three," I promised. "Good night!"

We shook hands, and I walked away. As I reached the doorway I looked back. Guimple had taken off his ring again, and was impatiently moving his hand in and out of

the empty beer glass. There was a strange, haunted look, half vexation, half pleasure, in his eyes . . .

His apartment hotel was, like himself, unpretentious. I found the bell marked GUTHRIE G. GUIMPLE and let myself in when the lock release buzzed. Guimple was waiting for me in the doorway of his rooms. He was wearing a faded old dressing gown and floppy Turkish slippers.

"!Olleh," he said. "!Ni emoc"

"What's that?" I said. "Sorry, old man. I only speak English."

"!Em esucxe, ho," he replied cryptically. He turned and raced into an adjoining room as I entered the apartment. In a few seconds he came back, knotting the belt of his dressing gown. His tone was apologetic.

"I'm really very sorry," he said abjectly. "I must have lost count. Sometimes I forget. Before you came I had been walking through the mirror, and—"

"You were *what?*"

"Oh, don't go!" he cried. "Here . . . give me your coat and hat. I won't do anything to frighten you. That is . . . unless you want to *see* me, I mean. Yes, I was walking through the mirror in my bedroom. It's easy when I haven't any clothes on, you know."

I had him that time . . . or so I thought. I smiled a bit smugly. "Very cute double talk, Guimple," I said, "but the Jabberwock quotes don't go. If you had walked *into* the mirror you would have to walk *out* again; that's common sense. And even if your speech *did* go haywire it would return to normal. Now, come clean. What's the big idea, anyway?"

"You still think it's a gag," he said plaintively, "but it isn't! Look . . . here's the mirror."

He caught my hand and led me into his bedroom. His

mirror was one of those old-fashioned double full-lengths, swung in a huge oval frame. Plenty large enough for a man to walk through . . . if the man *could* walk through it. A pile of discarded clothing lay on the floor. I stared at the mirror, then at Guimple.

"You mean," I said slowly, "you really *can* walk through that thing?"

"Watch!" he cried. He whisked off his gown, let it slip to the floor. In one swift motion he strode to the mirror, arms outstretched before him. His body seemed to melt inch by inch into the glass. Where his flesh touched the cool, shining surface a faint ripple appeared to pass over the glass; nothing more. Before my eyes Guimple faded into the mirror. A pink heel was the last part of him to disappear . . . then I was staring at my own open-mouthed reflection in the glass. Guimple walked around from *behind* the mirror to face me triumphantly.

"?Ees," he said.

I felt an urge to find my things and get out of his damned apartment . . . fast. But stronger was the desire to know what the hell Guimple was doing, and how he was doing it. I studied him carefully. Something about him was not quite right. Something was indefinably *different*. With a start I realized what it was. Guimple's hair. It was parted on the wrong side!

"My God, man," I exploded, "you're reversed!"

"?Desrever," he echoed curiously.

"Your hair," I told him, "and your *heart*. It's on your right side!"

For I could see, now, the faint pulsing of that organ on the side it shouldn't be.

Guimple studied himself wonderingly.

"Ynnuf s'taht," he said. "Fi—"

"If you *must* talk," I said, "for heaven's sake go through

the mirror again. I can't understand your looking-glass chatter."

Hastily he darted through the glass again. This time I had an edge-on view of the double mirror. I could watch one part of Guimple disappearing into the glass as the rest of him emerged, unscathed, from the other mirror. I saw, too, the way his flesh seemed to *embrace* the cool flatness of the glass, leaping toward it with a sort of insensate eagerness, parting from it with the slow reluctance of a farewell kiss. There was something distantly obscene in the unholy affinity existing between his body and that cold surface. Something I could feel but not explain. A tiny chill ran up and down my spine.

"Well?" asked Guimple, emerging. "What do you think?"

"I don't know *what* to think," I said dubiously, "except that the whole thing is screwy. Listen . . . if a ring can stop your hand from going through glass, why doesn't the plating behind the mirror stop you?"

"I don't know. I don't understand anything about it," complained Guthrie Guimple. "I wish I did. It's all very confusing."

"Confusing, hell! It's preposterous!" I told him.

He wrung his hands. A trite, but the only way to describe his action.

"I know that," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm a freak. No one on earth has ever walked through glass before. Now *I* can do it . . . and I don't want to. But what shall I do about it? What *can* I do?"

"If I were you," I advised, "I'd consult a physician. I'd consult a whole raft of physicians. I'd go before the whole damned Medical Board, Guimple."

"They'll poke me," said Guimple in a gray voice. "They'll poke me and push me and question me. They'll

put me under X-rays and fluoroscopes. They'll put me on special diets and take blood-tests. They'll wrangle and fuss and argue . . . and I'll be Exhibit A. They'll want to put me away in an institution, or stuff me and put me in a museum. No! I won't see any more doctors. One was enough. I won't be a freak. I *won't!*"

"Then the next best thing," I offered, "is to try and forget about your strange gift. Don't do anything to remind yourself that you can walk through glass. You say it came on you suddenly?"

"Overnight."

"Then maybe it will go away overnight, too. For it *must* go away, you know. It's contrary to every law of physics. Yes, that's what I'd do. I'd try to forget all about it. Ignore it entirely."

Guimple raised tragic eyes to mine.

"It's more than simply an ability," he said. "It's an obsession. I wake up in the middle of the night and think, 'Is it really true? I wonder if I really *can* walk through glass? Or was it just a dream?' Then I get out of bed and walk and walk and walk . . . in and out of mirrors, windows, doorpanes . . . anything made of glass! I can't resist the temptation."

He shuddered and looked away from me. Then:

"I lied to you," he confessed dully. "I told you there was no sensation to speak of. But there is. A marvelous *soothing* sensation. A feeling of infinite peace . . . infinite contentment. It's as if the glass were my love and I its lover. But I can never know my love completely. For there are only those cold and shallow panes to enter, oh, so briefly . . .

"Sometimes I think that if I could find one great mold of glass large enough to contain all of me at once, instead of these flimsy little shells that touch only a part of me, I

would move into it. Merge with it and dwell there for ever and for ever . . ."

I stared at him, fascinated but curiously shamed by the strange desire lurking in his eyes.

"You think glass holds nothing?" he babbled feverishly. "You think there is only gray emptiness in the depths of glass? Well, you're wrong. There is a world within the cool shadows. A world no man but me has ever seen. I have caught glimpses of it . . . fragmentary glimpses, tantalizingly wondrous, in the thin panes I've walked through. A beautiful world with gleaming cities, towering halls, sparkling rivers, people—"

"*Guimple!*" I said sharply. The crawling light flickered once in his eyes, died out. He stared at me dully.

"I'm sorry. Forget what I just said. It really doesn't matter. I guess I'll make out somehow. You're going now?"

"Yes," I said, "I'm going now."

He saw me to the door. We shook hands with a finality unspoken but tacitly acknowledged. I knew I would never come back and so did Guimple. But I was impelled to say one more thing before leaving.

"Give it up, Guimple," I urged him. "Keep your ring on your hand . . . always."

He smiled wanly.

"Goodbye," he said. "And . . . thank you for believing."

Then the door closed between us.

I never saw Guthrie Guimple again. But I did see his name once more. Several months later I was covering the lobster watch one night and Chet Browne, the telegraph editor, tossed me a flimsy from the AP wire.

"Get a load of this," he said. "This guy must have been a real whacky."

The report was datelined from that large observatory in California. You know . . . the one where they're mounting that huge new telescope with the twelve foot mirror?

"Swift action on the part of observatory guards," it read, "today thwarted a supposed attempt to destroy the gigantic telescope now nearing completion here. Special officers Kelly and Monoghan, discovering that one member of a touring party had remained behind in the observatory room, returned in time to prevent any damage intended to the delicate mirror.

"While the culprit was not apprehended, a pile of discarded clothing bearing the name of one G. Guimple of New York City was found at the base of the telescope. California police are seeking a nude madman in the vicinity of the observatory, and an arrest is expected hourly . . ."

"What do you think of that?" chuckled Browne. "Say, why the hell would any nut want to wreck that 'scope? Why, the astronomers will learn plenty with that thing when it's finished. They'll find new stars, new suns, perhaps even new worlds—"

"New worlds," I said, a curious sort of horror creeping over me. "Perhaps a beautiful new world with gleaming cities, towering halls, sparkling rivers—"

"Huh?" snorted Browne. "What's 'at?"

"Nothing," I told him. "Nothing at all . . ."

THE ENCHANTED PENCIL

I can do with my pencil what I know,
What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep . . .

I'M WASTING my time, of course. You won't believe this story, though it's gospel truth, so help me Ticonderoga! If I told you the character's name you'd *have* to believe. But, then, if I told you his *real* name he'd sue the pants off me. And if he should happen to sign the writ in a certain way . . .

But I'll begin at the beginning:

Beth Martin came into my office with an armload of manuscripts salvaged from the unrush mail.

"Well, Beth?" I asked. "Anything good in the batch, or are you just trying to justify your salary?"

"The Goon," she said uncertainly. "He's in again."

Every editorial office has its quota of crackpots. The Goon was ours. His name was . . . well, I can't tell you his real name, but I'll call him Wilbert Carruthers, which is close enough. To call his stories bad would be like saying polecats have a faint aroma. His stories were *awful* . . . and you can spell that any way you please.

"So soon, Beth?" I moaned. "Why, we just finished fumigating the office after his last offering."

"I know. But I'd like you to read this one, Mike." She fumbled through the pile and laid it before me. I glared at it, then at her, indignantly.

"Hey, this manuscript isn't even typed! It's written in longhand. And in pencil, at that. If you think I'm going to ruin my eyesight—"

"Please?" she pleaded. "Just this once, Mike?"

I looked at her and went all runny inside. Beth is the girl they wrote the nursery rhyme about. She's sugar and spice and everything nice . . . and even Harvard University isn't as well endowed as she is. With the same things, anyhow.

"Well, all right," I conceded. "This once. Get me a clothespin, then shut the door."

And I settled back in my swivel chair to read.

But I didn't stay settled very long. Beth was right. That yarn was a wowser. From paragraph one to the sockeroo denouement it had me sitting up tense and absorbed . . . and when a story can do that to a tale-weary old editor like me, it's *got* something.

When I had finished reading, I slumped back in my chair limp as a dinnershirt in a Turkish bath. But it was a happy exhaustion. I had lived and loved, suffered and fought my way to a hard-earned victory. So I was satisfied with life, myself, and with the story I had just read. Other readers . . .

Other readers! My editorial ego reawakened with a start, and I grabbed for the telephone.

"Beth," I bawled, "the Goon! Call him! I want to see him right away."

"You . . . did you like his story?"

"*Like* it! Did Damon like Pythias? Does Abercrombie like Fitch? It's the greatest literary coup since the alphabet. I want to get Carruthers' name on the dotted line immediately, if not sooner. That story's worth a million bucks."

"What are you going to pay him for it?" asked Beth.

"Two cents a word," I rasped. "There's no sense in spoiling him. Now, hurry! Get him in here."

Thus it was that a short time later I carved myself a niche in literature's hall of fame by being the first editor to greet Wilbert Carruthers, *alias* Destiny's darling.

He was a tall, skinny guy, not bad looking . . . except for an Adam's apple that stuck in his throat like an unswallowed orange. But fidgety? He wriggled and twisted like a Mexican jumping bean chasing a whirling dervish around a carousel on a pogo stick.

He gulped, "You wanted to see me, Mr. Morley?"

"Not exactly," I said, "but it was unavoidable. This story you sent in, *'Hearts Aflame.'* Did you write it yourself?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Of course."

"You're sure of that? We can't risk plagiarism suits in this business. You realize you must sign a release before we buy it?"

"*Buy* it! You mean you're going to *buy* my story?"

"Isn't that what you wanted?" I grinned. "Show him the contract, Beth."

Carruthers was so excited he didn't even pause to read it. He could have been signing an order for his own execution, so far as he knew. He whipped a pencil out of his pocket, scribbled his signature, and passed the contract back to me before Beth could dunk a pen in ink.

Beth frowned. "A pencil signature? Is that legal?"

"Perfectly," I nodded. "But speaking of pencils . . . would you mind *typing* your stories in the future, Mr. Carruthers?"

"Sure, Mr. Morley," nodded Wilbert. "I would have typed *'Hearts Aflame'* except that I had to hock my machine. But I'll get it out again right away."

"Good. Now, what are you going to do for us next?"

"Well, there's a novel I'd like to write. It's the story of this girl, see? She meets this young man, and—"

"That sounds great," I approved. "Now suppose you run along home and start it? We'll mail your check."

I rose, wrestled him for my hand, and the door closed behind him. I turned to Beth. "Well? What do you think of our genius?"

"I learned to like olives," said Beth thoughtfully. "Did you ever see anyone so glad to sell a story? He still has no idea what you're paying him for it. What was it? Two cents a word?" She glanced at the contract negligently, then her eyes widened and her voice warmed. "Why, Mike, you old darling! Always trying to let on you have icewater in your veins. I could kiss you. In fact, I think I will!"

And she carried through with Operation Lipstick to the complete satisfaction of the target. But it didn't make sense. Not until I glimpsed over her shoulder the contract for *"Hearts Aflame."*

It was a clerical error, of course. One for which some typist would have caught blazes, except that I should have discovered it myself before I countersigned the agreement. It seemed that instead of the intended one hundred and fifty dollars, we were going to pay Wilbert Carruthers for his story . . . *seven* hundred and fifty dollars!

Well, in due course of time the promised novel came in. Beth brought it to me at arm's length. I took the proffered sheets uncertainly, read aloud the title.

" *'The South American Turquoise.'* What kind of a yarn is it, Beth? Inca?"

"That rhymes," said Beth. "But read it yourself."

I didn't have to read it all. You don't have to eat a whole crate of oysters to discover it's August. *"The South American Turquoise"* was the All-American turkey . . . and I

do mean it was fowl! I was still staring at it, numb with shock, when the interoffice thingamajigger buzzed.

"A gentleman to see you, Mr. Morley," announced the receptionist. "He says you know him."

"He's an imposter," I grated. "I don't know any gentlemen. All my acquaintances are writers and artists."

"Yes, sir." Her voice faded, and as I reached for the key I heard her say, "I'm sorry, Mr. Carruthers, but—"

"Wait a minute," I yowled. "Is that Wilbert Carruthers? Send him in here. Beth, hand me my paperknife."

A moment later the Goon entered. He bore a bulky manuscript under one arm. When I lunged at him, he lurched backward, sprinkling pages all over the floor.

"Hey," he bleated. "Cut it out!"

"I aim to!" I told him grimly. "Come closer, pal."

Beth had stooped to reclaim the scattered sheets. Now she said in a strangled voice, "Mike—"

"Later, Beth. I'll help you burn it after while."

"Over my dead body!" declared Carruthers hotly.

"Over his dead body," I agreed.

But Beth grabbed my arm, held it, and shoved a page of pencil-scribbled paper before my eyes. "Mike, *read* this!"

Well, what else can you do when a paper is held in front of you? I read. Reluctantly at first, then eagerly, till at last I was gobbling the contents of those pages as voraciously as a hypochondriac reading a nostrum label.

It was the same novel I had tried to plow through before . . . but with a difference. This tale was vibrant, alive, vital. The beauty of its phraseology was matchless. I said, "Why, Wilbert, you big old joker, you! What was the idea of mailing us the rough draft of "*South American Turquoise*"? If we hadn't known what a great writer you are, we might have been fooled by the gag."

"I—" faltered Wilbert.

"I don't understand, though, why you *typed* an early draft, then wrote the final one in pencil. I distinctly asked you to type all final copy in the future."

Wilbert drew a deep, long, weary breath and squared his angular shoulders. He wore the woebegone expression of a man caught in the Grand Central washroom without a nickel.

"I could *lie* to you, Mr. Morley," he said ruefully. "I could lie to you, and maybe get away with it. But I won't. I'm going to tell you the truth.

"That typewritten copy was my final draft. And the pencil draft I brought in was my first."

I gazed at him in bewilderment. "You mean it? But how on earth could you bring yourself to change a word of that first, perfect draft . . . and make the story worse?"

"I don't know," he acknowledged dully, "unless it's just that my writing instinct is bad."

"Ridiculous! If your writing instinct wasn't good how could you create such a perfect *first* draft?"

Again he sighed. And again he said, "I don't know. Unless it's because I'm writing with an enchanted pencil."

Well, as I said before, every editorial office has its quota of crackpots. Ours is no exception. For instance, one of our best writers never wears a necktie; another always wears *two* ties. Balzac wore a monk's hood and wrote in a room scented with decayed apples; one of *our* contributors can't do a lick of work with his clothes on. Maybe all wingdings are not writers, but the vice-versa is certainly Q.E.D.

So I said nothing. It was Beth who asked curiously, "Enchanted? Did you say . . . *enchanted* pencil?"

"I was discouraged," said Wilbert. "I was terribly discouraged—"

"You were talking about a pencil," I reminded him.

"I'm still talking about it," said Wilbert. "I was terribly discouraged. I wanted to be a writer more than anything else in the world. But no one would buy my stories. I had given up my job to devote my full time to writing, and as I hadn't had much money in the bank to start with, it wasn't long before I went broke.

"I started pawning things. Although I had only the world's largest collection of rejection slips to show for my efforts, I still believed I could write. My watch went first, then my class ring and my Eagle Scout badge. My landlady got my luggage. The clothing problem solved itself. I hocked my suits to pay the laundry bills. After that, I didn't have any more laundry bills.

"I held onto my books to the last. Then I had to eat them one by one. Figuratively, of course; not literally. I bartered them for whatever restaurateurs would give me. Some of them became excellent dinners. *'Gone with the Wind'* was a hot Southern chicken. *'Forever Amber'* was spiced goose. *'Goodnight, Sweet Prince!'* was a boiled ham."

He sighed reflectively.

"The pencil?" I asked.

"I'm coming to that. Last month I reached the end of my rope. I had nothing left. Nothing. I had even pawned my typewriter, so I couldn't write any more stories. I had a dollar bill—one lonely dollar bill—left to my name.

"So I wrote a farewell note, left it in my room, and walked down toward the river, determined to end it all. I knew a lovely, quiet spot for suicide . . .

"But I never reached there. On the way I passed an old man selling knickknacks from a tray. On a sudden impulse I paused. Where I was going I had no use for money. So I tossed the crumpled bill at him and would have gone on. But he stopped me.

" 'Just a minute, young man,' he said. 'You didn't select your merchandise.'

" 'That's all right,' I said. 'I don't want any.'

" 'I'm sorry, sir,' he said, shaking his head. 'I'm a merchant, not a beggar. I can't accept this without giving you something in return.'

"I stared at his tray impatiently. It was littered with the usual array of geegaws: shoelaces, buttons, pencils, tin whistles . . . that sort of trash.

" 'But you have nothing I want,' I said.

" 'Everyone wants something,' he said oddly. He was a strange old character with ageless eyes that seemed to look right through you. 'Everyone,' he repeated firmly. 'Are you a musician, perchance? Then here is an instrument upon which to pipe the tunes that will set the world to singing—' And he touched his lips to a wee penny whistle. It was silly, of course, and an indication of my distraught condition, but for an instant I seemed to hear the surging swell of symphony—the voices of a thousand Stradivari singing songs no human yet has scored.

" 'Or perhaps you are a merchant,' he went on, 'like myself. Could you not then use these scales that measure the honest worth of goods?' And he toyed with a tiny balance. I can't be sure, but it seemed most curiously to rise because I frowned at it disdainfully. But when the old man smiled upon it, its needle dipped as if to weigh the warmth and sincerity of that smile.

"I said curtly, 'You have nothing I want, because I am nothing. Once I dreamed of being a writer, but—'

" 'A writer?' interrupted the old vendor. 'Then of course you will need a pencil. Here, my son—' And into my hands he pressed the pencil—'Take this. And with it write bright tales to charm mankind.'

"I said, 'But I don't want—'

" 'Goodbye, my son,' he smiled, 'and good fortune to you.' Then he turned and was gone, leaving me staring foolishly after him, clutching a pencil in one hand. How he disappeared so swiftly I have no idea. Nor where. One minute he was hobbling down the street; the next he had vanished into the crowd. I have never seen him since.

"But I didn't go on to the river, as I'd planned. Somehow that pencil set me to thinking. If that poor codger, old and miserable and unimportant as he was, could remain so undaunted by fate as to retain his pride despite his poverty; if he could refuse to enbeggar himself by *demanding* the right to give value for value received, accepting no charity from anyone . . . why, then, I was a weakling coward!

"What if I had no money? What if I *had* hocked all my possessions? I had my youth, my health . . . and my dreams. I had a pencil to write with; some paper was left unused in my room. I had my stories clamoring in my heart to be written.

"I turned and went back to my lodgings. I started writing that night. You know the result. You bought it. It was the story, *'Hearts Aflame'*."

Wilbert faltered to a close, looked at us woefully and sighed.

"So you see," he concluded, "it was not I who wrote *'Hearts'* and the *'Turquoise'*. It was the pencil, the magic pencil. You know my writing. You know I'm not capable of doing anything one-half—one-tenth—so good as those two stories. I'm a literary fake, an artistic saprophyte—"

"May I see that pencil?" I asked.

He passed it to me. It looked much like any other pencil. A little more gnawed around the butt, maybe. Wilbert was, as I've said, a nervous jasper. It bore no patent or manufacturer's serial number. Just the single trade name: *MIDAS*.

I said, "Well, I suppose we could break the rules just for once. Okay, Wilbert. Never mind typing your manuscripts. Just send 'em in and we'll have 'em typed."

Wilbert's eyes widened. "You mean," he gasped, "in spite of what I've told you, you still want me to write for you?"

"Certainly," I said. "Do you want to sign the contract for the *'Turquoise'* novel now?"

He did, and we did. I succeeded in keeping solvent the corporation I work for. This time we signed the contract with my pen.

When Wilbert had left Beth asked, "Well, Mike? Is Wilbert crazy, or do *we* reserve rooms with bath at Bellevue?"

"Meaning which, my pet?"

"The pencil, of course. Is it enchanted, or—?"

"Oh, that!" I yawned. "Elementary, my dear Martin. It's an obsession, that's all. The psychiatrists have a word for it . . . only I can't pronounce the word.

"Figure it out for yourself. Wilbert Carruthers, a hungry young hopeful, wrote stories until he was blue in the face . . . and sold none of them. Then suddenly, dead broke and on his uppers, he turned out a salable piece of merchandise, using a new pencil obtained under rather odd circumstances . . . and bingo! Immediately his auctorial—*i.e.,* imaginative—mind transfers the credit from himself to the instrument of accomplishment.

"It's a common fixation. The same that causes professional gamblers to carry 'lucky' pocketpieces, and impels superstitious baseball players to step on third base as they run out onto the playing field."

"You," said Beth admiringly, "know everything."

"Not quite," I replied modestly. "Just *most* everything."

"But how about the old man with the strange gadgets in his tray?"

"There are a thousand old vendors like that in New York. Did you ever look at their trays?"

"But he said such strange things—"

"He said perfectly commonplace things. Carruthers' excited imagination supplied the *outré* overtones. That day, in his frame of mind, he would have detected mystic meanings in the lyrics to *'Mary Had a Little Lamb.'* "

"You may," granted Beth, "be right."

"Sure I am. And I'm right about *this,* too: Wilbert Carruthers is going to be the brightest and shiniest new star in the literary firmament when his first story appears in our next issue. Any takers?"

"Not I," said Beth. "I'm betting with the house."

Maybe by now you've guessed the real name of the guy I've been calling—to avoid legal complications—"Wilbert Carruthers." If so, I can telescope the next seventy-seven chapters, covering a period of almost that many weeks, since it comes under the heading of ancient history as familiar to you as your toothbrush.

Let me say merely that my hunch was right. *"Hearts Aflame"* hit the newsstands on a Monday. By Wednesday there wasn't a copy of our magazine left anywhere in the nation. Thursday morning the mail, telegrams and telephone calls started pouring in. Readers demanding more Carruthers stories . . . agents pleading for his address . . . critics splattering praise with the reckless abandon of a ragweed distributing sneeze-spores.

By the end of the week we had been forced to print an unprecedented second edition, add three extra office girls to handle the torrent of Carruthers' mail, and liquidate spies from four rival publications desirous of luring Wil-

bert away from us. A book publisher had contracted to print Wilbert's first novel sight unseen; a nationally syndicated news and radio columnist had *Flash!*ed the fact that "Carruthers" was a pseudonym for a well known political figure—(he subsequently changed this to make it (*a*) a deceased minor poet of the Nineteenth Century, (*b*) Joe Stalin, and (*c*) a garbage collector from Hogwallow, Ark.)—and five Hollywood outfits were slugging it out to see which could add the most zeroes to its bid for Wilbert's services.

Wilbert came to me, frankly puzzled. He was living at my place temporarily, having been forced to flee his rooming house when the bobby-soxers learned his address.

"What should I do, Mr. Morley?" he asked. "I can't decide what's best. I like the money, of course. I signed the ad testimonials and okayed the radio contract. But how about this Hollywood deal?"

"What do you *want* to do?" I parried. "Do you want to join the suntan and sportshirt brigade?"

"No," he answered frankly, "I don't. I want to be a writer, that's all. For you, preferably," he added a trifle dubiously. "But the editors of some other magazines have been offering me quite a bit more—"

"Then by all means write," I advised him. "Happiness comes only from doing what you most want to do. And as for the money . . . don't worry about that. We'll match and top any other offers you get.

"Sit tight for a little while. You're a one story sensation so far. Wait till we've published '*Turquoise*' and a few more pieces. You'll get offers that will make this present golden stream look like a trickle. And speaking of stories . . . what are you working on now?"

"A new novel. It's about this girl, see? She meets this young man, and they—"

"It sounds," I approved, "sensational. Where in hell do you *get* such unusual ideas?"

That was the beginning. You remember the hysteria that greeted the publication of *"The South American Turquoise"* and the subsequent *"Yesterday Is Never"*? Sure you do! Wilbert owes Beth an assist on the latter. The writing was his, and up to his inimitable standard, but his original title for the story was *"Two Young People."* Beth suggested the abstract title that had the female population tearing its hair out in ecstasy because it held so much "meaning". Me, I didn't get it then, and I don't get it now. But who am I to argue against a two year run on Broadway and a Book-of-the-Month Club bonus?

Our magazine printed these first, of course. And the famous Carruthers' two part novelettes. And the ten thousand word *"This Selfsame Song"* which won the Pulitzer Award for the year. Wilbert Carruthers' name on our cover was as potent as a shot of cantharides. One month we sold more copies than *The Reader's Digest*—which is just about ten less than infinity squared!

Those were the Golden Days. We were all making hey-hey while sonny shone. I had been promoted from plain editor to Editorial Director. Beth was now Editorial Assistant, and had finally set the date for my long proposed orange blossom festival. Wilbert was the toast of American letters; the first toast, I believe, who wasn't something of a crumb. It all looked glorious, just too good to last.

It was . . .

A soft bell chimed, a carillon began to play *"Hail the Conquering Hero Comes!"*, men and girls in the office whisked into two columns facing each other and knelt with bowed heads, and two liveried footmen unrolled a purple

velvet carpet from the elevator door to my office . . . which was a modest little ritual we had cooked up to herald Wilbert's visits to the office. That's the nice part about working for an old and conservative organization like ours; we don't go in for flashy modern ballyhoo.

When the three of us were safely alone, Carruthers brought forth his new manuscript from the diamond studded briefcase we had given him as a tiny token of our appreciation. I stared bewildered at the slim sheaf of paper he handed me. Beth looked puzzled, too.

"A short story, Wilbert?" she said. "I thought you were doing a novel."

Wilbert laced his lean fingers together nervously, unlaced them, laced them again. Finally he gulped, "Mr. Morley . . . how many words will a lead pencil write?"

"Oh, I don't know. A couple hundred thousand, maybe. I never thought—" Then suddenly I *did* think. And the result of my thinking was consternation. "Wilbert!" I cried. "Not the enchanted—?"

Wilbert nodded morbidly. "Yes. It's worn almost to a nub. It's my own fault, I guess. I was careless at first. I wrote everything with it: letters, checks, notes to the milkman. As near as I can figure, I've written about a hundred and seventy-five thousand words with the enchanted pencil. If you're right, I've only got about twenty-five thousand left."

"Then we must get you a new one," I said. "That's the obvious answer. We must find out who made this, and buy a whole boxful."

"It's not that easy, Mr. Morley. I've written to every pencil manufacturer in the country. None of them ever made or ever heard of a pencil called the *Midas.*" He worked his Adam's apple, then continued miserably, "And I can't find

the old man, either. I spent the whole of last week looking for him. But he's gone."

"Wilbert," said Beth suddenly, "it's time you were told something. Mr. Morley says—"

"Never mind, Beth," I interrupted hastily. "Wilbert, you stop worrying about this and leave it to me. I'll try to think of something. Meanwhile, try to forget your troubles in a new story. Will you?"

"Maybe," said Wilbert. "A short story, though."

"Anything you wish. I'll see you later."

He left, and Beth turned to me curiously.

"Why didn't you let me tell him, Mike? He's a success now. It's time he realized his genius lies in himself, not in his pencil. After all—"

"Wrong, my lamb," I said. "It's too late. It was too late from the beginning. Nothing on earth could or would ever convince Wilbert Carruthers that pencil isn't the key to his success. With it in his hands he is a writer without peer. Lacking it—" I shrugged. "Well, you remember his early stories?"

"But that's fantastic!" gasped Beth. "Impossible!"

"Fantastic," I agreed, "yes. Impossible . . . no. Ask any psychologist. Our only solution is to transfer his faith fixation to another writing instrument. *If* it can be done."

But it couldn't. We tried everything. There's not a make, or weight, or size, or type of pencil made that we didn't buy for Wilbert Carruthers to try. He tried them all . . . and without result. The stories which flowed from them were the same words to be found in his masterpieces, but the sequence was all wrong. Without the aid and assistance of the magic instrument, he was as fumbling and inept as a thumbless ape at a bowling alley.

We tried pens . . . all makes of pens, including a new bullet-shaped job guaranteed to last a postal-chess-playing deepsea diver two thousand years. No go! We tried typewriters with various kinds of ribbons. All we got for our pains was inky fingers. We even rigged an elaborate plant. We hired an actor to peddle geegaws from a tray, and I traipsed Wilbert past the old phony. Wilbert screamed with joy when he found the word *Midas* on the pencil—we'd had the pencil specially made—but his first paragraph with it began: *"Once upon a time there was a girl named Mary Jones, and she loved a young man named Ralph Thompson—"*

Not exactly what you'd call immortal literature.

I'll cut it short. This is a story about a pencil, so I might as well get to the point.

Wilbert wrote us four more stories. They were superb stories, each and every one of them. After that, by sheer force of will I managed to wangle a one thousand word short-short out of him. He didn't want to write it. He had by now determined to cling to each dwindling word in his waning instrument as if it were his life's blood . . . which, in a way, it was. But that short-short is a classic. You'll find it reprinted in a half dozen anthologies, and it's required reading in every school in the nation.

That was the last fiction piece I could squeeze out of Wilbert Carruthers. As a farewell gesture he wrote me a two hundred word editorial on *Charity* . . . an appeal for funds for a certain organization you all know. That year they had to hire fifty extra clerks to open the envelopes of contributors.

His last appearance in our magazine was a four-line poem. It contained a total of fifty-eight words. I know them by heart, and so, probably, do you. It's a poem beloved by every man, woman and child in the United States.

A famous composer set it to music, and it topped the Hit Parade for eighteen weeks.

After that, there was just one thing left to do. I advised it. It was the last service I could perform for the genius who had placed me at the top of my profession.

"Hollywood, Wilbert?" I said. "They still want you?"

He nodded. "Yes. They're offering five thousand a week now. But it wouldn't be fair to accept, Mr. Morley. I'm through. I haven't a thing to offer them."

"Once you called yourself," I recalled, "an artistic saprophyte. Now you're being an artistic sap. You *have* got something to offer them. Your name. If you're certain you're finished writing, run—don't walk—to the nearest telegraph office and accept the offer."

"But they'll find out I can't write—"

"Are you kidding? Out on the Gold Coast they don't buy ability, they buy *names*. Names and relatives. They'll sign you to a juicy contract, welcome you with a reception party that will make Belshazzer's Feast look like a weinie roast, ensconce you in a dirty little sixteen room studio . . . and forget you. Go West, young man, and live on the fatheads of the land."

"Well, if you really think I should, Mr. Morley—?"

"I do," I assured him solemnly. "Goodbye, Wilbert, and good luck. If you ever run into that old man again, and get another *Midas* pencil—"

"I'll be back," promised the one-time Goon. "When that happens, I'll be back."

But he's not back yet, so I guess that was that. Wilbert Carruthers signed the movie option—with the stub of his enchanted pencil, of course—and he's out in Hollywood now gathering fame, wealth and screen credits like crazy.

I've often wondered who *really* writes the scripts his name is tagged to . . .

PILGRIMAGE

Tarye no lenger; toward thyn heritage
Hast on thy weye, and be of ryght good chere.
Go eche day onward on thy pylgrymage . . .

IN HER twelfth summer the illness came upon Meg and she was afraid. Afraid, yet turbulent with a sense of exaltation unlike anything she had ever before known. She was a woman now. She was become a woman, and she knew suddenly and completely that which was expected of her from this day forth. Knew . . . and dreaded.

She went immediately to the *hoam* of the Mother, for such was the Law. But as she moved down the walk-avenue she stared with eyes newly curious at the Men she passed. At their pale and pitifully hairless bodies. At their soft, futile hands and weak mouths. One lolling on the doorstep of 'Ana's *hoam* returned her gaze brazenly, made a small enticing gesture. Meg shuddered and curled her lips in a refusal-face.

Only yesterday she had been a child. Now suddenly she was a woman. And for the first time Meg saw her people as they really were.

The warriors of the Clan. She looked with distaste upon the tense angularity of their bodies: the corded legs, the tightset jaws, the cold eyes and the brawny arms scarred to the elbow with ill-healed cicatrices. The tiny, thwarted breasts, flat and hard beneath leather harness-plates. Fighters they were, and nothing else.

This was not what she wanted.

She saw, too, the mothers: the full-lipped, flabby-breasted bearers of children; whose skins were soft and white as those of the Men; whose eyes were humid, washed barren of all expression by desires too oft aroused, too often sated. Their bodies bulged at hip and thigh, swayed when they walked like ripe grain billowing in a lush and fertile field. They lived only that the tribe might continue to exist. They reproduced.

This was not what she wanted.

Then there were the workers. Their bodies retained a vestige of womankind's inherent grace and nobility. But if their waists were thin, their hands were blunt-fingered and thick. Their shoulders sagged with the weariness of toil, were coarsened by adze and hod. Their faces grimly mirrored eternal struggle with an unyielding earth. And the earth of which they had made themselves a part had in return made itself a part of them. The workers' hides were browned with soil, their bodies stank of dirt and grime and unwashed perspiration.

This was not what she wanted.

No, none of these was what she wanted.

So great was Meg's concentration that she entered into the *hoam* of the Mother without crying out, as was required. Thus it was that she discovered the Mother making great magic to the gods.

In her right hand the Mother held a stick. With it she scratched upon a smooth, bleached, calfskin scroll. From time to time she let the stick drink from a pool of midnight cupped in a dish before her. When she moved it again on the hide it left its spoor, a spidery trail of black.

For a long moment Meg stood and watched, wondering. Then dread overcame her; fear-thoughts shook her body. She thought suddenly of the gods. Of austere Jarg, their leader; of lean Ibrim and taciturn Taamuz. Of far-seeing

Tedhi, she whose laughter echoes in the roaring summer thunders. What wrath would they visit upon one who had spied into their secrets?

She covered her eyes and dropped to her knees. But there were footsteps before her, and the Mother's hands upon her shoulders. And there was but gentle chiding in the voice of the Mother as she said, "My child, know you not the Law? That all must cry out before entering the Mother's *hoam?*"

Meg's fear-thoughts went away. The Mother was good. It was she who fed and clothed the Clan, warmed them in dark winter and found them meat when meat was scarce. If she who was the gods' spokesman on earth saw no evil in Meg's unintentional prying . . .

Meg dared look again at the magic stick. There was a question in her eyes. The Mother answered that question. She said:

"It is 'writing,' Meg. Speech without words."

Speech-without-words? Meg crept to the table, bent a curious ear over the spider-marks. But she heard no sound. Then the Mother was beside her again, saying, "No, my child. It does not speak to the ears, but to the eyes. Listen, I will make it speak through my mouth."

She read aloud:

"Report of the month of June, 3478 A. D. There has been no change in the number of the Jinnia Clan. Still we are five score and seven, with chattels of nineteen Men, twelve kine, thirty horses. But there is reason to believe that 'Ana and Sahlee will soon add to our number.

"Last week Darthee, Lina and Alis journeyed into the Clina territory in search of game. They met there several of the Durm Clan and exchanged gifts of salt and bacca. Pledges of friendship were given. On the return trip Darthee was trapped by one of the Wild Ones, but was rescued

by her companions before the strain could be crossed. The Wild One was destroyed.

"We have in our village a visitor from the Delwurs of the east, who says that in her territory the Wild Ones have almost disappeared. Illness, she says, has depleted their Men, and she begs that we lend their Clan studs. I have promised her Jak and Ralf, both strong and proven—"

The Mother stopped. "That is as far as I had gone, my child, when you entered."

Meg's eyes were wide with wonder. It was quite true that Darthee, Lina and Alis had recently returned from a trip to Clina. And that there was now a visitor in camp. But how could the speech-without-words know these things, *tell* these things? She said, "But, Mother . . . will not the speech-without-words forget?"

"No, Meg. *We* forget. The books remember always."

"Books, Mother?"

"These are books." The Mother moved to the sleeping part of her *hoam,* selected one of a tumbled pile of calf-skin scrolls. "Here are the records of our Clan from ages past . . . since the time of the Ancient Ones. Not all are here. Some have been lost. Others were ruined by flood or destroyed by fire.

"But it is the Mother's duty to keep these records. That is why the Mother must know the art of making the speech-without-words. It is hard work, my little one. A labor without end."

Meg's eyes were shining. The trouble that had been cold within her before was vanished now. In its place had come a great thought. A thought *so* great, *so* daring, that Meg had to open her lips twice before the words came.

"Is it—" she asked breathlessly—"is it very hard to become a Mother?"

The Mother smiled gently. "Very hard, Meg. But you should not think of such things. It is not yet time for you to decide—" She paused, looking at Meg strangely—"Or . . . or is it, my child?"

Meg flushed, and her eyes dropped.

"It is, Mother."

"Then be not afraid, my daughter. You know the Law. At this important hour it is yours to decide what station in life will be yours. What is your wish, Meg? Would you be a warrior, a worker, or a breeding mother?"

Meg looked at the Clan leader boldly.

"I would be," she said, "a Mother!" Then, swiftly, "But not a breeding mother. I mean a *Clan* Mother . . . like you, O Mother!"

The Mother stared. Then the harsh lines melted from her face and she said, thoughtfully, "Thrice before has that request been made of me, Meg. Each time I have refused. It was Beth who asked first, oh, many years ago. She became a warrior, and died gallantly lifting the siege of Loovil . . .

"Then Haizl. And the last time it was Heln. When I refused, she became the other type of mother.

"But I was younger then. Now I am old. And it is right that there should be someone to take my place when I am gone—"

She stared at the girl intently. "It is not easy, my daughter. There is much work to be done. Labor, not of the body but of the mind. There are great problems to be solved, stern vows to be taken, a hard pilgrimage to be made—"

"All these," swore Meg, "would I gladly do, O Mother! if you will but let me—" Her voice broke suddenly—"I cannot become anything else. I would not be a warrior, harsh and bitter, nor a worker black with dirt. And the breeders

. . . I would sooner mate with a Wild One than with one of the Men. The thought of their soft hands—"

She shuddered. And the Clan Mother nodded, understanding. "Very well, Meg. Tomorrow you will move into this *hoam*. You will live with me and study to become the Jinnia Clan's next Mother . . ."

So began Meg's training. Nor was the Mother wrong in saying that the task was not an easy one. Many were the times when Meg wept bitterly, striving to learn that which a Mother must know. There was the speech-without-words, which Meg learned to call "writing." It looked like a simple magic when the Mother did it. But that slender stick which moved so fluidly beneath the Mother's aged fingers slipped and skidded and made ugly blotches of midnight on the hide whenever Meg tried to make spider-marks.

Meg learned that these wavering lines were not meaningless. Each line was made of "sentences," each sentence of "words," and each word was composed of "letters." And each letter made a sound, just as each combination of letters made a word-sound.

These were strange and confusing. A single letter out of place could change the whole meaning of a word. Sometimes it altered the meaning of the whole sentence. But Meg's determination was great. There came finally the day when the Mother allowed her to write the monthly report in the Clan history. Meg was thirteen then. But already she was older in wisdom than the others of her Clan.

Then it was that the Mother began to teach her yet another magic. This was the magic of "numbers." Where there had been twenty-six letters, there were only ten numbers. But theirs was a vast and potent magic. Put together they formed other and greater numbers. Yet those

same numbers taken from each other formed still a third group. The names of these magics Meg never did quite learn. They were strange-sounding meaningless terms: "multiplication" and "subtraction." But she learned how to do them.

Her task was very hard, for it was about this time that the Evil Ones sent a little pain-imp to torment her. He stole in through her ear one night while she was sleeping, and for many months he lurked in her head, above her eyes. Each time she would set herself to study the magic of the numbers he would begin dancing up and down, trying to stop her. But Meg persisted, and finally the pain-imp died or was removed. And Meg knew the numbers . . .

There were the rites and rituals to be learned. There was the Sacred Song which must be learned by heart. This song had no tune but was accompanied by the beating of the tribal drums. Its words were strange and terrible, echoing the majesty of the gods in its cryptic phrasing.

"O, Saken! you see by Tedhi on his early Light—"

This was a great song. A powerful magic. It was the only tribal song Meg learned which dared name one of the gods. And it had to be sung reverently, lest far-seeing Tedhi be displeased and show her monstrous teeth and destroy the invoker with her mirthful thunders.

Meg learned, too, the tribal song of the Jinnia Clan. She had known it from infancy, but its words had been obscure. Now she had learned enough to probe its import. She did not know the meanings of some of the forgotten words, but for the most part it made sense when the tribe gathered on festive nights to sing, *"Caämé back to over Jinnia—"*

And Meg grew in age and stature and wisdom. In her sixteenth summer her legs were long and firm and straight

as a warrior's spear. Her body was supple, bronzed by sunlight save where her doeskin breechcloth kept the skin white. Unbound, her hair would have trailed the earth, but she wore it piled upon her head, fastened by a netting woven by the breeding-mothers too ancient to bear.

The vanity-god had died long ages since, and Meg had no way of knowing she was beautiful. But sometimes, seeing her reflection in the pool as she bathed, she approved the soft curves of her slim young body, and was more than ever glad and proud that she had become a neophyte to the Mother. She liked her body to be this way. Why, she did not know. But she was glad she had not turned lean and hard, as had those of her age who had become warriors. Or coarse, as had become the workers. Or soft and flabby, as were the breeding-mothers. Her skin was clear and clean, brown where the sunlight burnished the fine down on her arms and legs, pure gold in the secret hollow of her high, firm breasts.

And finally there came the day when the Mother let Meg conduct the rites at the Feast of the Blossoms. This was in July, and Meg had then entered upon her seventeenth year. It was a great occasion and a great test. But Meg did not fail. She conducted the elaborate ceremony from beginning to end without a single mistake.

That night in the quiet of their *hoam* the Mother made a final magic. She drew from her collection of aged trophies a curl of parchment. This she blessed. Then she handed it to Meg.

"You are ready now, O my daughter," she said. "In the morning you will leave."

"Leave, Mother?" asked Meg.

"For the final test. This which I give you is a map: a teller-of-places. Here at this joining of mountain and river lies our village in the heart of the Jinnia territory.

Far away westward and to the north, as here is shown, is the Place of the Gods. There will all be made clear to you, even that final secret which the Clan must never know."

"I do not understand, Mother."

"You will, my daughter . . . later. And now to sleep. For at dawn tomorrow begins your pilgrimage . . . "

Off in the hills a wild dog howled his savage tribute to a melancholy moon. His thin song clove the stirring si lence of the trees, the incessant movement of the forest. Meg wakened at that cry, wakened and saw that already the red edge of dawn tinged the eastern sky.

She uncurled from the broad tree crotch in which she had spent the night. Her horse was already awake, and with restless movements was nibbling the sparse grass beneath the giant oak. Meg loosed his tether, bathed the sleep-imps from her eyes at a nearby spring, then set about making breakfast. There was not much food in her saddlebags. A side of rabbit carefully saved from last night's dinner. Two biscuits, slightly dry. A precious handful of salt. Meg ate sparingly, resolved to build camp earlier tonight in order to set a few game traps and bake another batch of biscuit.

She cleared a space, scratching a wide circle of earth bare of all leaves and twigs, walking thrice around it widdershins to chase away the fire-demon. Then she scratched the fire-stone against a piece of the black metal from a town of the Ancient Ones—a gift of the Mother—and kindled her little fire.

Two weeks had passed since she had left the Jinnia territory. She had come from the rugged mountainlands of her homeland, through the river valleys of the Hyan Clan. On the flat plains of the Yana section she had made an

error. Her map had shown the route clearly, but she had come upon a road built by the Ancient Ones: a road of white *creet,* still in fair repair. And because it was easier to travel on this highway than to thread a way through the jungle, she had let her path drift southward.

It was not until she reached the time-crumbled village of Slooie that friendly Zurries had pointed out her mistake. Then she had turned northward and westward again, going up the Big River to the territory of the Demoys.

Now, her map showed, she was in Braska territory. Two more weeks—perhaps less than that—would bring her to her goal. To the sacred Place of the Gods.

Meg started and roused from her musings as a twig snapped in the forest behind her. In one swift motion she had wheeled, drawn her sword, and was facing the spot from which the sound had come. But the green bushes did not tremble; no further crackling came from the underbrush. Her fears allayed, she turned to the important business of roasting her side of rabbit.

It was always needful to be on the alert. Meg had learned that lesson early, even before her second day's journey had carried her out of Jinnia territory. For as the Mother had warned, there were still many Wild Ones roaming through the land, searching for food, for the precious fire-metal from the ruined villages of the Ancient Ones . . . most of all for mates. The Wild Ones were slowly dying out because there were few females left among them. Most of the Wild Ones were male. But there was little in their shaggy bodies, their thick, brutish faces, their hard, gnarled muscles, to remind one of the Men.

A Wild One had attacked Meg in her second night's camp. Fortunately she had not yet been asleep when he appeared, else her pilgrimage would have ended abruptly.

Not that he would have killed her. The Wild Ones did not kill the Women they captured. They took them to their dens. And a priestess could not cross her strain with a Wild One and still become a Mother.

So Meg had fought fiercely, and the Wild One's bones lay deep in the Jinnia hills, picked white by the vultures. But since that escape Meg had slept nightly in trees, her sword clenched in her hand.

The food was cooked now. Meg removed it from the spit, blew upon it, and began to eat. She had many things on her mind. The end of her pilgrimage was nigh. The hour when she would enter into the Place of the Gods, and learn the last and most carefully guarded secret.

That is why her senses failed her. That is why she did not even know the Wild One lurked near until with a roar of throaty satisfaction he had leaped from the shrubbery, seized her, and pinioned her struggling arms to her sides.

It was a silent struggle but a bitter one. For all her slimness, Meg's body was sturdy. She fought pantherlike, using every weapon with which the gods had endowed her: her fists, her legs, her teeth. But the Wild One's strength was as great as his ardor was strong. He crushed Meg to him fiercely; the stink of his sweat burned her nostrils. His arms bruised her breasts, choked the breath from her straining lungs. One furry arm tensed about her throat, cutting off the precious air.

Meg writhed, broke free momentarily, buried her strong teeth in his arm. A howl of hurt and rage broke from the Wild One's lips. Meg tugged at her sword. But again the Wild One threw himself upon her, this time with great fists flailing. Meg saw a hammerlike hand smashing down upon her, felt the shocking concussion of the Wild One's strength. A lightning flashed. The ground leaped up to meet her. Then all was darkness . . .

She woke, moaning weakly. Her head was splitting and the bones of her body ached. She started to struggle to her feet, had risen halfway before she discovered with a burst of hope that she *could* move! She was not bound. Then the Wild One . . .

She glanced about her swiftly. She was still lying in the little glade where she had been attacked. The sun's full orb had crept over the horizon, threading a lacework of light through the tiny glen. Her fire smoldered still. And beside it crouched a—a—

Meg could not decide *what* it was. It looked a little like a Man. But that, of course, was impossible. Its body was bronzed by the sun, smooth and almost as hairless as her own. But it was not the weak, soft body of a Man. It was muscular, hard, firm; taller and stronger than that of a warrior.

Flight was Meg's first thought. But her curiosity was even stronger than her fear. This was a mystery. And her sword was beside her. Whoever or whatever this Thing might be it did not seem to wish her harm. She spoke to it.

"Who are you?" asked Meg. "And where is the Wild One?"

The stranger looked up, and a happy-look spread over his even features. He pointed briefly to the shrubbery. Meg's eyes followed the gesture, saw lying there the dead body of the Wild One. Her puzzled gaze returned to the Man-thing.

"You killed him? Then you are not one of the Wild Ones? But I do not understand. You are not a Man."

"You," said the Man-thing in a voice deeper than Meg had ever heard from a human throat, "talk too much. Sit down and eat, Woman."

He tossed Meg a piece of her own rabbit-meat. Half unaware that she did so, Meg took it and began eating.

She stared at the stranger as he finished his own repast, wiped his hands on his clout and moved toward her. Meg dropped her half-eaten breakfast, rose hastily and groped for her sword.

"Touch me not, Hairless One!" she cried. "I am a priestess of the Jinnia Clan. It is not for such as you to—"

The stranger brushed by her without even seeming to hear her words. He reached the spot where her horse had been tethered, shook ruefully a section of broken rein.

"You women!" he snorted. "You do not know how to train a horse. See, he ran away."

Meg thought anger thoughts. Her face burned with the sun though the sun's rays were dim in the glade. She cried, "Man-thing, know you no better than to talk thus to a Woman and a master? By Jarg, I should have you whipped."

"You talk too much," repeated the Man-thing wearily. Once more he squatted on his hunkers, studied her thoughtfully. "But you interest me. Who are you? What are you doing so far from the Jinnia territory? Where are you going?"

"A priestess," said Meg coldly, "does not answer the questions of a Man-thing."

"I'm not a Man-*thing*," said the stranger pettishly, "I am a Man. A Man of the Kirki tribe which lives many days walking south of here. I am Daiv, known as He-who-would-learn. So tell me, Woman."

His candor confused Meg. Despite herself, she found the words leaving her lips. "I . . . I am Meg. I am making pilgrimage to the Place of the Gods. It is my final task ere I become Mother of my clan."

The Man's eyes appraised her with embarrassing frankness. "So?" he said. "Mother of a Clan? Meg, would you not rather stay with me and mother your own clan?"

Meg gasped. Men were the mates of Women, yes, but never had any Man had the audacity to *suggest* such a thing. Matings were arranged by the Mother with the agreement of the Woman. And surely this Man must know that priestesses did not mate.

"Man," she cried, "know you not the Law? I am soon to become a Clan Mother. Guard your words, or the wrath of the Gods—"

The Man, Daiv, made happy-sounds again. "It was I who saved you from the Wild One," he chuckled, "not the Gods. In my land, Golden One, we think it does no harm to ask. But if you are unwilling—" He shrugged—"I will leave you now."

He rose and started to leave. Meg's face reddened. She cried out angrily, "Man!"

He turned. "Yes?"

"I have no horse. How am I to get to the Place of the Gods?"

"Afoot, Golden One. Or are you Women too weak to make such a journey?"

He laughed again . . . and was gone.

For a long moment Meg stared after him, watching the green fronds close behind his disappearing form, feeling the stark desolation of utter aloneness close in upon and envelop her. Then she did a thing she herself could not understand. She put down her foot upon the ground, hard, in an angry-movement.

The sun was high and growing warmer. The journey to the Place of the Gods was longer now that she had no mount. But the pilgrimage was a sacred obligation. Meg scraped dirt over the smoldering embers of her fire. She tossed her saddlebags across her shoulder and faced westward. And she pressed on.

The way was long, the day hot and tedious. Before the sun rode overhead, Meg was sticky with sweat and dust. Her feet were sore and her legs ached with the unaccustomed exercise of walking. By afternoon every step was an agony. And while the sun was still too-strong-to-be-looked-at she found a small spring of fresh water and decided to make camp there for the night.

She set out two snares for small game, took the flour and salt from her saddlebags, and set about making a batch of biscuit. As the rocks heated she went to the stream and put her feet in it, letting the water-god lick the fever from her tender soles.

From where she sat she could not see the fire. She had been there perhaps half an hour when a strange, unfamiliar smell wrinkled her nostrils. It was at once a sweet-and-bitter smell, a pungent odor like strong herbs, but one that set the water to running in her mouth.

She went back to her camp hastily and found there the Man, Daiv, once again crouching over her fireplace. He was watching a pot on the stones. From time to time he stirred the pot with a long stick. Drawing closer, Meg saw a brown water in the pot. It was this which made the aromatic smell. She would have called out to the Man, but he saw her first.

"Hello, Golden One," he said.

Meg said angrily, "What are you doing here?"

The Man shrugged.

"I am Daiv; they call me He-who-would-learn. I got to thinking about this Place of the Gods and decided I, too, would come and see it." He sniffed the brown, bubbling liquid, seemed satisfied. He poured some of it into an earthen bowl and handed it to Meg. "You want some?"

Meg edged toward him cautiously. This might be a ruse of the Man from the Kirki tribe. Perhaps this strange,

aromatic liquid was a drug. The Mother of her Clan had the secret of such drinks. There was one which caused the head to pucker, the mouth to dry and the feet to reel.

"What is it?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Cawfi, of course." Daiv looked surprised. "Don't you know? But, no . . . I suppose the bean-tree would not grow in your cold northern climate. It grows near my land. In Sippe and Weezian territories. Drink it."

Meg tasted the stuff. It was like its smell: strong and bitter, but strangely pleasing. Its heat coursed through her, taking the tired-pain from her body as the water of the spring had taken the burn from her feet.

"It is good, Man," she said.

"Daiv," said the Man. "My name is Daiv, Golden One."

"It is not fitting," she said, "that a priestess should call a Man by his name."

Daiv seemed to be given to making happy-sounds. He made one again.

"You have done a lot of things today that are not fitting for a priestess, Golden One. You are not in Jinnia now. Things are different here. And as for me—" He shrugged—"My people do things differently. We come from the Land of the Escape."

"The Escape?" asked Meg.

"Yes." As he talked, Daiv busied himself. He had taken meat from his pouch and was wrapping it now in clay. He tossed the caked lumps into the embers of the crude oven. He also had something Meg had not tasted for many weeks: taters. He took the skins off these, cut them into slices with his hunting-knife, and browned the pieces on a slab of heated rock. "The Escape of the Ancient Ones, you know."

"I don't understand," said Meg.

"Neither do I . . . quite. It happened many years ago. Before my father's father's father's people. There are books in the tribe Master's *hoam* which tell. I have seen some of them.

"Once things were different, you know. In the days of the Ancient Ones, Men and Women were equal throughout the world. In fact, the Men were usually the Masters. But the Men were warlike and fierce—"

"Like the Wild Ones, you mean?"

"Yes. But they did not fight, like the Wild Ones, with clubs and spears. They made war with great catapults that threw fire and flame and exploding death. With little bows that shot steel arrowheads. With gases that destroy, and waters that burn the skin.

"On earth and sea they made these battles, and even in the air. For in those days the Ancient Ones had wings like birds. They soared high, making great thunders. And when they warred, they dropped huge eggs of fire which killed others."

Meg cried sharply, "Oh—!"

"Don't you believe me?"

"The taters, Daiv. They're burning."

"Oh!" Daiv made a happy-face and carefully turned the scorching tater slices. Then he continued.

"It is written that there came a last and greatest war of all. It was a conflict not only between the Clans but between the forces of the entire earth. For many years this war lasted, but neither side could gain a victory. In those days it was the Men who fought, while the Women remained *hoam* to keep the Men's houses. But the Men died by the thousands. And there came a day when the Women grew tired of the slaughter.

"They banded together, all of them who lived in the civilized places. They decided to rid themselves of the

brutal Men. They stopped sending supplies and fire-eggs to the battling Men across the sea. They built walled forts and hid themselves in them.

"The war ended when the Men found they had no more weapons to fight with. They came back to their *hoams,* seeking their Women. But the Women would not receive them. There was bitter warfare once again . . . this time between the sexes. But the Women held their walled cities. And so—"

"Yes?" said Meg.

"The Men," said Daiv somberly, "became the Wild Ones of the forest. Mateless, save for the few Women they could capture. Their numbers died off. The Clans grew. Only in a few places—like Kirki, my homeland—did humanity not become a matriarchy."

He looked at Meg. "You believe?"

Meg shook her head. Suddenly she felt very sorry for this stranger, Daiv. She knew, now, why he had not harmed her. Why, when she had been powerless before him, he had not forced her to mate with him. He was mad. Totally and completely mad. She said, gently, "Shall we eat, Daiv?"

Mad or not, there was great pleasure in having Daiv's company on the long, weary, remaining marches of her pilgrimage. Thus it was that Meg made no effort to discourage him in his desire to accompany her. He was harmless, and he was pleasant company . . . for a Man. And his talk, wild as it was at times, served to pass wearisome hours.

So the slow days passed, turning into weeks. Not many miles did they cover in those first few days while Meg's feet were tender and her legs full of jumping little pain-imps. But when hard walking had destroyed the pain-imps,

they traveled faster. And the time of their journey's ending drew ever nearer. They crossed the Braska territory and entered at last into the 'Kota country. Near here at the far western end, near Yomin, was the Place of the Gods.

"You started, once, to tell about the Escape, Daiv," said Meg one night, "but you did not finish. What is the legend of the Escape?"

Daiv sprawled lazily before the fire. His eyes were dreamy.

"It happened in the Zoni territory," he said, "not far from the land of my own tribe. In those days there was a Man-god named Renn who foresaw the death of the Ancient Ones. He built a gigantic sky-bird of metal, and into its bowels climbed two score Men and Women.

"They flew away, off there—" Daiv pointed to a shining white dot in the sky above—"to the evening star. But it is said that one day they will return. That is why our tribe tries to preserve the customs of the Ancient Ones. Why even misguided tribes like yours preserve the records—"

Meg's face reddened.

"Enough!" she cried. "I have listened to many of your tales without comment, Daiv. But tell me no more such tales as this. This is blasphemy!"

"Blasphemy?"

"It is bad enough that your deranged mind should tell of days when Men ruled the earth. But when you speak of a *Man-god—*"

Daiv looked worried. He said, "But, Golden One, I thought you knew that all the gods were Men."

"Daiv!" Meg swung suddenly to face him, covered his lips with her hands. Her eyes sought the darkness fearfully; she made a swift gesture and a swifter prayer. "Daiv, do

not tempt the fury of the Gods! I am a priestess, and I know. All the Gods are—*must be*—Women!"

"But why?"

"Why, because they are," said Meg. "It could not be otherwise. All Women know the gods are great, good and strong. How, then, could they be Men: great Jarg, and mighty Ibrim, strong Taamuz, and the laughing Tedhi—?"

Daiv's eyes narrowed in a wonder-look.

"I do not know those names," he mused. "They are not gods of our tribe. And yet . . . I have heard legends. Ibrim . . . Tedhi . . ."

There was vast pity and a sorrow in Meg's voice.

"We have been comrades for a long journey, Daiv," she pleaded. "Never before since the world began have a Man and a Woman met as you and I; as friends, almost as equals. Often you have said mad, impossible things. But I have forgiven you because . . . well, because you are, after all, only a Man.

"But tomorrow, or the day after that, we will come to the Place of the Gods. There will my pilgrimage be ended, and I will learn that which is the ultimate secret. Then I shall return to my Clan to become the Mother. So let us not spoil our last hours of comradeship with vain argument."

Daiv sighed.

"The elder ones are gone and their legends tell so little. It may be you are right, Golden One. But I have a feeling that it is *my* tribal lore which does not err. Meg . . . I asked this once before. Now I ask again. Will you give up this quest and mate with me?"

"It is impossible, Daiv. Priestesses and Mothers do not mate. I am a Priestess; soon I will be a Mother. But—" Meg's voice was gentle—"I will take you back with me to

Jinnia, if you wish. And I will see to it that you are taken care of always, Daiv, as a Man should be taken care of."

Daiv shook his head.

"No, Meg. Our ways are not the same. There is a custom in our tribe . . . a mating custom which you do not know. Let me show you—"

He leaned over swiftly. Meg felt the great, warm strength of his bronzed arms closing about her, drawing her close. Then he was touching his mouth to hers; closely, brutally, frighteningly.

She struggled and tried to cry out, but his lips silenced her. Anger-thoughts swept through her like a flame. But it was not anger, it was something else that gave life to that flame. Suddenly her veins were aflow with liquid fire. Her heart beat upon rising breasts like something captive that would be free. Her fists beat upon his shoulders vainly . . . but there was little strength in her blows.

Then he released her, and Meg fell back exhausted. Her eyes glowed with anger and her voice was husky in her throat. She tried to speak and could not. And in that moment a vast and terrible weakness trembled through Meg. She knew suddenly and helplessly that if Daiv sought now to mate with her not all the wisdom of the priestessdom could save her. There was a body-hunger throbbing within her that hated Daiv's manhood . . . and cried in wanting for it.

But Daiv, too, had stepped back. And his voice was low as he said, "Meg?"

She scrubbed her lips with the back of her hand. Her voice was vibrant, breaking. "What magic is that, Daiv? What custom is that? I hate it. I hate you!"

"It is the touching-of-mouths, Golden One. It is the right of a Man with his Woman. It is my plea that you en-

ter not the Place of the Gods but return with me now to Kirki, there to be my mate."

For a moment indecision swayed Meg. But then, slowly, "No. I must go to the Place of the Gods," she said.

And thus it was. For the next day Meg marked on the teller-of-places the last line that indicated the path of her pilgrimage. And at eventide, when the sun threw long, ruddy rays upon the rounded hills of black, she and Daiv entered into that gateway which she had been told led to the Place of the Gods.

It was here they lingered a moment. There were many words each would have said to the other. But both knew this was the end.

"I know no Law, Daiv," said Meg, "which forbids a Man from entering the Place of the Gods. So you may do so if you wish. But it is not fitting that we should enter together. Therefore I ask you to wait here while I enter alone.

"Here I will learn the secret. And having learned, I will go out by another path and return to Jinnia."

"You will go . . . alone?"

"Yes, Daiv."

Daiv nodded.

"It is yours to decide, Golden One. But . . . should you change your mind—"

"I will not, Daiv."

"But if you should—" he persisted.

"If by some madness I should change my mind," said Meg, "I will return to you here. But it will not happen. Therefore do not wait."

"I will wait, Golden One," said Daiv soberly, "until all hope is dead."

Meg turned away, then hesitated and turned back. A great sorrow was within her. She did not know why. But she knew of one magic that for a little time could heal her heart.

"Daiv—" she whispered.

"Yes, Golden One?"

"No one will ever know. And before I leave you for ever . . . could we not once more do the rite of the touching-of-mouths?"

So it was that alone and with the recollection of a moment of stirring glory in her heart, Meg strode proudly at last into the Place of the Gods.

It was a wild and desolate place. Barren hills of sand rose about, and of vegetation there was none save sparse weeds and scrubby stumps that flowered miserly in the bleak, chill air.

The ground was harsh and salt beneath her feet; no insects sang an evensong in that drab wilderness. Afar, a nightjar pierced the sky with its lonely call; the great hills echoed that cry dismally.

Above the other hills towered a greater one. To this, with unerring footsteps, Meg took her way. She knew not what to expect. It might be that here a band of singing virgins would appear to her, guiding her to a secret altar before which she would kneel and learn the last mystery. Here might she meet those fabled Mothers who rule all the earth. It might be that the Gods themselves reigned here, and that she would fall in awe before the sweeping skirts of austere Jarg, to hear from the Gods' own lips that which she had come so far to learn.

Whatever the secret that would be revealed to her, Meg was ready. Others had gained this place and had survived. She did not fear death. But . . . death-in-life? Coming to

the Place of the Gods with a blasphemy in her heart? With the memory of a Man's mouth upon her own?

For a moment, Meg was afraid. She had betrayed her priestessdom. Her body was inviolate, true . . . but would not the Gods search her soul and know that her heart had forgotten the Law, had mated with a Man?

But if death must be her lot . . . so be it. She pressed on . . .

So Meg turned down a winding path between two tortuous clefts of rock and came at last unto the Place of the Gods. Nor could she have chosen a better moment for the ultimate reaching of this place. The sun's roundness had now touched the western horizon, bathing the dark valley with an avenue of light. Meg's eyes, wondering, followed that avenue. And then, with awe in her heart, Meg fell to her knees. She had glimpsed that-which-was-not-to-be-seen. The Gods themselves, in omnipotent majesty looking down upon her from the crest of the towering rocks.

For tremulous moments Meg knelt there, whispering the ritual prayers of appeasement. At any moment she expected to hear the voice of Tedhi, thunderous in judgment, or to feel upon her shoulder the weighty hand of Jarg. But there came no sound save the frenzied beating of her own heart, of the wind stirring fretfully through the crevices of the ageless rocks.

And she lifted her head and looked once more . . .

It was they. A race-recollection deeper and more sure than her own meagre learning told her at once that she had not erred. This was, indeed, the Place of the Gods. And these she faced were indeed the Gods . . . stern, implacable, eternal, carven in timeless stone by hands of the Ancient Ones.

Here they were: the Great Four. Stern Jarg and mighty Taamuz, with ringletted curls framing their stern, judicial faces; sad Ibrim, lean of cheek and hollow of eye; farseeing Tedhi, whose eyes were concealed behind the giant telescopes; whose lips, even now, were peeled back as though to loose that dreadful laughter.

And the Secret?

Even as the question leaped to her mind it had its answer. Suddenly Meg knew that here was no visitation to be made upon her. Here would appear no circle of singing virgins; here she would have no message from those great stone lips. For the Secret which the Mother had hinted . . . the Secret which the Clanswomen must not know . . . was a truth Daiv had confided to her during the long marches of their pilgrimage.

The Gods . . . were Men!

Oh, not men like Jak and Ralf, whose pale and furtive bodies were but instruments by which the breeding mothers' bodies were fertilized. Nor male beasts like the Wild Ones. But Men like Daiv . . . lean and hard of jaw, strong of muscle, sturdy of body.

Even the curls could not conceal the strong, clean masculinity of Jarg and Taamuz. Tedhi's lip was covered with Man-hair, clearcut and bristling above his happy-mouth. And Ibrim's cheeks were haired, even as Daiv's before each dawn he made his tribal cut-magic with a keen knife.

The Gods, the rulers, the masters of the Ancient Ones had been Men. It was as Daiv had said: long years ago the Women had rebelled, and now in sterile penance they pursued their cold and loveless courses save where—in a few places like the land of Kirki—the old way still maintained.

It was a great knowledge and a bitter one. Now Meg

understood why the Mother's lot was so unhappy. Only the Mother knew how artificial this new life was. How one day the Wild Ones would die out, and the captive Men as well. When that day came there would be no more young. No more Men *or* Women. No more civilization . . .

The Gods knew this. That is why, here in the gray hills of 'Kota, they stood so sad, forlorn, forgotten, the dying gods of a dying race. The Gods knew that by an ancient folly humankind had doomed itself to slow but certain death. They knew, and grieved because there was no hope. Sharing this secret, Meg must return to her Clan with lips sealed. There, like the Mother before her, she must watch with haunted eyes the slow dwindling of their tiny number . . . see the weak and futile remnants of Man die off. Until, at last . . .

Then, like the clear, cold vision of the newborn moon, came a burst of hope to Meg.

The Mother had been wrong. For the Mother on *her* pilgrimage had not been so fortunate as had Meg. She had not learned that in the world were still places where Man had preserved himself in the image of the Gods.

But she, Meg, knew! And knowing she was presented with the greatest choice that ever a Woman had been given.

Forward, into the valley, lay the path through which she could return to her Clan. There she would become Mother and would guide and guard her people through a lifetime. She would be all-wise, all-powerful, all-important. But she would be virgin unto death, sterile with the sanctity of tradition.

This she might do. But there was yet another way. And Meg threw her arms high, crying out that the Gods might hear and decide her problem.

The Gods spoke not. Their solemn features, weighted with the sorrows of slow time, moved not nor spoke to her. But as she searched their faces for an answer to her vast despair, there came to Meg a memory. It was a passage from the Prayer of Ibrim. And as her lips framed those remembered words it seemed the slanted rays of the dying sun centered on Ibrim's weary face, and those great, stone eyes were alive for a moment with understanding and approval.

"—shall not perish from the earth, but have everlasting life—"

Then Meg, the priestess, decided. With a cry that broke from her heart she turned and ran. Not toward the sterile valley. But back . . . back to the fecund world on feet that were suddenly stumbling and eager. Back from the shadow of Mount Rushmore to a gateway where waited the Man who had taught her the touching-of-mouths.